

PEEPS INTO TAMIL CULTURE - 6

THE SAIVA SAINTS

M. ARUNACHALAM

**GANDHI VIDYALAYAM
TIRUCHITRAMBALAM
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PREFACE

In the years 1962-64, a number of the articles which constitute this volume was written by us at the invitation of the Editor of *Sarvodaya*, a Gandhian monthly magazine from Tanjavur, and were published in it. They were written naturally with a slant on Gandhian Sarvodaya doctrines of Truth and Non-violence and of 'Unto this Last'. These doctrines are nothing new to the Tamil Saivas, who would agree with the *Purananuru* poet, 'Any place is my place and all people are my kin' and whose creed is 'Mankind is One and God is One' according to their canon writer Tirumular. To these doctrines the Saivas would add self-effacement and surrender to the Divine Will.

These stories are taken from the *Periya puranam* a large biography of the 63 Saiva Saints written by Saint Sekkilar in 1139-1140 A. D. He was the Chief Minister of the Chola Emperor Kulottunga II (1133-1150) and he wrote this large hagiology at his request, in 4253 verses. (An account of this Saint is given at pages 200-202 of this book, section 4 in the Appendix). A grateful posterity has included the large book as Book XII of the Saiva Canon. The book is a great testament of devotion and surrender to God, introducing a new order of democracy based on Sivajnana. The book had revolutionised the life and outlook of the entire people of Tamil Nadu from the 12th century to this day. It is not only a history of the Saiva Saints, but is also a sensitive epic poem of good poetry.

J. M. Nallaswami Pillai wrote the stories of some of the lives as told by Sekkilar, in his short English *Periya puranam* in a series of articles published in a newspaper from Madras by 1913 and they were later collected together in book form. But the lives were not complete. Pillai closely followed Sekkilar and although he gave a separate paragraph at the end of each story as 'Teachings', the lives had not been told in a modern perspective. It is strange that with all the modern awakening in matters of literature, religion and

philosophy, the lives of the Periya puranam Saints have not been given in a complete volume till this day.¹ The present volume is an attempt to supply that want.

II

It is worth noting here that the stories of the *Periyapuranam* of Sekkilar had been adapted into the Sanskrit language in two volumes as a similar *puranam*. One was the *Upamānya Bhakta Vilasam* written by an anonymous author and published in two parts in the grantha script with a total of 6825 slokas (the first part 5175 and the second part 1650 slokas) in handsome print in 1915. Another later adaptation by Hara sarma in 3530 slokas had been printed earlier in 1907 in the name of *Siva (Agastya) bhakta vilasam*. The two translations belong to the 19th century. The writers do not seem to have been familiar with the Tamil language and their renderings of the Tamil proper names sound very queer and funny. The *Basava Puranam*, a large poem in the Kannada language, was translated into the Tamil language in an epic poetic form by an anonymous writer in the 18th century. It deals with some of the *Periyapuranam* stories with a complete Vira Saiva twist.

Vidwan P. Suryanarayana Sarma has published a condensed Telugu prose version of the *Periya puranam* with the title *Sri Sivabhakta Charitramu* in 1962 in about 600 pages with half a dozen illustrations. He has here included the story of St. Manikkavasakar also, in order to give a completeness to the Saiva Acharyas. Late Mr. K. P. K. Menon, former Chief Secretary to the Government of Kerala, had rendered the *Periya puranam* in prose in the Malayalam language. It is awaiting print.

A curious imitation may be cited. V. S. Chengalvaraya Pillai who died at the age of 88 in 1971 was one of the

¹ A kind of an annotated translation by Shri G. Vanmikanathan, the well known writer and translator, is in the process of publication in his Pathway to God series in a large volume.

greatest devotees of the Saiva Canon and of God as Lord Muruha. Out of his great bhakti, he had caused a fine epic poem in praise of the servants of Lord Muruha to be written by Vanur Chokkalingam Pillai. It was written completely on the model of Sekkilar's *Periva puranam* in 3333 verses and was published in the name of *Sey-Tondar-Puranam* (Sey is the son of Siva, Lord Muruha) in 1960.

These are instances to show the great interest evinced by some other languages and by enlightened Tamil savants in the lives of the Saiva Saints.

The *Guruparampara-prabhavam* (the glory of the line of Preceptors) can be considered as the Vaishnava counterpart of the Saiva *Periva puranam*. This was written by Pinpalahiya perumal Jiyar, (1290 A.D.) disciple of Nampillai, the fourth great acharya after Ramanuja. The *Prabhavam* is written in a new kind of prose, later called *manipravala*, a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil expressions. It deals with the lives of all the Alvar and then with the lives of the Acharyas (Preceptors) up to the date of the author. Here the lives of the Acharyas may be considered to be historical, while the lives of the earlier Alvar are always given as legend. Many later writers in Vaishnavism had tried their hand at *Guru parampara* writing, adding more fanciful stories to the earlier text of Pinpalahiya Jiyar. The poetry of Sekkilar, his lyricism and the spirit of soulful surrender to God which is the keynote of *Periya puranam* is naturally absent in these narrations.

The *Maha Bhakta Vijayam* glorifying the lives of the Vaishnava Saints, principally in the Mahratta country, is also a fine book of Saints. It is done in prose and contains the stories of men and women of God. Almost all the Saints mentioned therein belong to the period 14-17th centuries and so in point of time, both the stories and the writing are much later than those of the Saiva Saints. Some of the Saiva Saints go back to the centuries B. C. Naturally the *Mahabhakta Vijayam* was inspired by the stories of the *Periya puranam* which floated over the adjacent Dravidian areas. The Mahratta people have a large proportion of Saints in all India (excepting the Tamil nadu) and so they seem to have taken

up the task of compiling Saint stories and have done it in a remarkable manner. Many parallels with the Tamil nadu Saints can be seen in the *Vijayam*. The stories are all of Vaishnava saints.

III

A word may be added here about the Tamil terminology employed in this chronicle. 'Ar' is an honorific plural suffix added to many proper names. The saints are all held in great veneration and though the poet Sekkilar has the licence to speak of a saint in the singular, the Tamil community in general refers to a saint only in the plural. Thus Nandan is always Nandanar, Kalayan is Kalayanar, Mangaiyarkkarasi is Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, Sadaiyan - Sadaiyanar. Isaijnani - Isaijnaniyar and so on. So also every saint has the 'r' suffix added - Marar, Kannappar, Muruhar etc. names which usually end in 'n'. Again when referring to sacred places, very often the term Tiru (holy) is prefixed and sometimes it is omitted. eg. Arur - Tiru Arur, Puhalur - Tirup - Puhalur and so on. The temple city of Chidambaram may be found mentioned as simply Tillai. Tiru Jnana Sambandhar may be referred to frequently as Sambandhar and Jnana Sambandhar.

These features may be noted for an easy understanding of the terminology in the stories.

The entire Tamil poem naming the saints is given at the end of the preface. Saint Nambiyandar Nambi (the saint who was responsible for discovering the Devaram hymns and for publicising them - vide pages 204 - 206 of the book) had written a short poem of 89 verses giving out the details about the 63 saints - their place, service etc., devoting one verse to each saint in the order of the Tiru-tondat-tohai. This poem was the second source for Sekkilar, but for want of space we are not reproducing the poem here. Saint Umapati Sivacharya, who wrote the story of the 'Discovery of the Devaram' and the 'Story of the writing of Sekkilar' in the form of two short purana poems, also wrote a synopsis of Sekkilar's great epic, in about A. D. 1310, devoting one verse to one saint. These constitute the only references to the complete stories of the saints.

The present English volume is only a summary, rendered in simple prose, of the original given in fine poetry in the epic *Periya puranam* (4253 verses). Under the title of each story, we have given in translation the line from *Tiru-Tondat-tohai* of Saint Sundarar mentioning the Saint. This was the basis for the *Periya puranam* of Sekkilar. The present English volume gives each story as Sekkilar narrated it. In about a dozen cases we have added some comments.

It is hoped this book will help a wider audience to have a glimpse of the pathway to God trod by great men of God in Tamil nadu in the Saiva fold in the centuries B. C. and up to the seventh century A.C. (the date of Sundararar). The book is published with financial assistance from the Tirumalai-Tiruppati Devasthanams under their scheme of aid for the publication of religious books.

This volume should have been published two years back but owing to the frauds committed by one S. Mahalingam a printer of Kumbhakonam in matters of both money and paper, the printing and publication had been inordinately delayed. I owe an apology to the Tirumalai - Tiruppati Devasthanams in the matter of the delay. The Gemini Printers of Tanjavur came to my rescue and they printed the book in record time. I am grateful to them for their neat and quick execution of the work. I am also grateful to the Tirumalai - Tiruppati Devasthanams for their generous aid.

We may follow this book with another on the Vaishnava Saints.

Thiruchitrambalam,	}	(M. ARUNACHALAM)
Mayuram 609 204.		
2-10-1985		
Gandhi's 116 th Birthday.		

சுந்தரமூர்த்தி சுவாமிகள் பாடியருளிய

திருத்தொண்டத்தொகை

பண் - கொல்லிக்கொளவாணம்

திருச்சிற்றம்பலம்

தில்லைவாழ் அந்தணர்தம் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
திருநீல கண்டத்துக் குயவனார்க் கடியேன்
இல்லையே என்னாத இயற்பகைக்கும் அடியேன்
இளையான்றன் குடிமாறன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
வெல்லுமா மிகவல்ல மெய்ப்பொருளுக் கடியேன்
விரிபொழில்கூழ் குன்றையார் விறன்மிண்டர்க் கடியேன்
அல்லிமென் முல்லையந்தார் அமர்நீதிக் கடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

இலைமலிந்த வேல் நம்பி எறிபத்தர்க் கடியேன்
ஏனாதி நாதன்தன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
சுலைமலிந்த சீர்நம்பி கண்ணப்பர்க் கடியேன்
கடவூரிற் கலயன்தன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
மலைமலிந்த தோள்வள்ளல் மானக்கஞ் சாறன்
எஞ்சாத வாட்டாயன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
அலைமலிந்த புனல்மங்கை ஆனாயர்க் கடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

மும்மையால் உலகாண்ட மூர்த்திக்கும் அடியேன்
முருகனுக்கும் உருத்திர பசுபதிக்கும் அடியேன்
செம்மையே திருநாளைப் பேர்வார்க்கும் அடியேன்
திருக்குறிப்புத் தொண்டர்தம் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
மெய்ம்மையே திருமேனி வழிபடா நிற்க
வெகுண்டெழுந்த தானததாள் மழுவினால் எறிந்த
அம்மையான் அடிச்சண்டிப் பெருமானுக் கடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

திருநின்ற செம்மையே செம்மையாக் கொண்ட
திருநாவுக் கரையன்தன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
பெருநம்பி குவச்சிறைதன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
பெருமிழலைக் குறும்பார்க்கும் பேயார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஒருநம்பி அப்பூதி அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஒலிபுனல்குழ் சாத்தமங்கை நீலநக்கர்க் கடியேன்
அருநம்பி நமிநந்தி அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

வம்பறா வரிவண்டு டணம்நாற மலரும்
மதுமலர்நற் கொன்றையான் அடியலாற் பேணா
எம்பிரான் சம்பந்தன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஏயர்கோன் கலிக்காமன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
நம்பிரான் திருமூலன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
நாட்டமிகு தண்டிக்கும் மூர்க்கார்க்கும் அடியேன்
அம்பரான் சோமாசி மாறனுக்கும் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

வார்கொண்ட வனமுனலயாள் உமையங் சன் கழலே
மறவாது கல்லெறிந்த சாக்கியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
சீர்கொண்ட புகழ்வள்ளல் சிறப்பிலிச்சும் அடியேன்
செங்காட்டங் குடிமேய சிறுத்தொண்டர்க் கடியேன்
கார்கொண்ட கொடைக்கழறிற் றறிவார்க்கும் அடியேன்
கடற்காழிக் கணநாதன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஆர்கொண்ட வேற்கூற்றன் களந்தைக்கோன் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

பொய்யடிமை யில்லாத புலவர்க்கும் அடியேன்
பொழிற்கருவூர்த் துஞ்சிய புகழ்ச்சோழர்க் கடியேன்
மெய்யடியான் நரசிங்க முனையரையர்க் கடியேன்
விரிதிரைகூழ் கடல்நாகை அதிபத்தர்க் கடியேன்
கைதடிந்த வரிசிலையான் கலிக்கம்பன் கலியன்
கழற்சத்தி விரிஞ்சையர்கோன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஐயடிகள் காடவர்கோன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

கறைக்கண்டன் கழலடியே காப்புக்கொண் டிருந்த
கணம்புல்ல நம்பிக்குங் காரிக்கும் அடியேன்
நிறைக்கொண்ட சிந்தையால் நெல்வேலி வென்ற
நின்றசீர் நெடுமாறன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்

துறைக்கொண்ட செம்பவளம் இருளகற்றுஞ் சோதித்
தொன்மயிலை வாயிலான் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
அறைக்கொண்ட வேல்நம்பி முனையடுவார்க் கடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

8

கடல்குழந்த உலகெல்லாங் காக்கின்ற பெருமான்
காடவர்கோன் கழற்சிங்கன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
மடல்குழந்த தார்நம்பி இடங்கழிக்கும் தஞ்சை
மன்னவனாம் செருத்துணைதன் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
புடைசூழ்ந்த புலியதள்மேல் அரவாட ஆடிப்
பொன்னடிக் கேமனம்வைத்த புகழ்த்துணைக்கும் அடியேன்
அடல்குழந்த வேல்நம்பி கோட்புலிக்கும் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

9

பத்தராய்ப் பணிவார்கள் எல்லார்கும் அடியேன்
பரமனையே பாடுவார் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
சித்தத்தைச் சிவன்பாலே வைத்தார்க்கும் அடியேன்
திருவாரூர்ப் பிறந்தார்கள் எல்லார்க்கும் அடியேன்
முப்போதும் திருமேனி தீண்டுவார்க் கடியேன்
முழுநீறு பூசிய முனிவர்க்கும் அடியேன்
அப்பாலும் அடிச்சார்ந்தார் அடியார்க்கும் அடியேன்
ஆரூரன் ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் காளே.

10

மன்னியசீர் மறைநாவன் நின்றவூர்ப் பூசல்
வரிவளையாள் மானிக்கும் நேசனுக்கும் அடியேன்
தென்னவனாய் உலகாண்ட செங்கணார்க் கடியேன்
திருநீல கண்டத்துப் பாணனார்க் கடியேன்
என்னவனாம் அரனடியே அடைந்திட்ட சடையன்
இசைஞானி காதலன் திருநாவ லுர்க்கோன்
அன்னவனாம் ஆரூரன் அடிமைகேட் டுவப்பார்
ஆரூரில் அம்மானுக் கன்பரா வாரே.

11

திருச்சிற்றம்பலம்

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கேடும் ஆக்கமும் கெட்ட திருவினார்
ஓடும் செம்பொனும் ஓக்கவே நோக்குவார் ;
ஊடும் அன்பினில் கும்பிடலே அன்றி,
வீடும் வேண்டா விறலின் விளங்கினார்.

ஆரம் கண்டுகை, ஆடையும் கந்தையே,
பாரம் ஈசன் பணிஅல தொன்றிலர்,
ஈர அன்பினர், யாதுங் குறைவிலார் ;
வீரம் என்னால் விளம்புந் தகையதோ!;

SEKKIZHAR'S PREFACE

They have the richest bounty
Where adversity as well as prosperity
Has ceased to exist. To them,
A pebble or a piece of gold
Makes no difference.

Their firmness is such that
They do not covet the heavens,
But long only to bow before the Lord,
With the fulness of heart.

Their only ornament is
A necklace of rudraksha beads,
Their raiment is nothing but rags.
Their only purpose is
The service of the Lord,
But their heart is overflowing
With love and compassion.

Therefore they have
No wants in this life.
Oh ! How shall I set forth
Their spiritual fortitude !

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PREAMBLE

The story of Saint Sundaramur̥ti is the genesis for the stories of all the 60 saints, celebrated by Saint Sekkilar in his great epic poem, now known as *Periya Puranam*. Sekkilar begins the story from Kailas and narrates the story of Sundarar under the title 'Stopping of the Wedding and Enslavement' of Sundarar, then goes on to refer to the incident at Tiru Arur where Sundarar was induced to sing a poem of 11 verses on the 63 saints of Tamilnad and the 9 groups of saints, declaring that he was the servant of the servants of each. Then Sekkilar proceeds to narrate the story or biography of each saint, in a few verses, or in a large number of verses as in the case of Saint Tirunavukkarasu, and Saint Tiru Inanasambandhar. Except the opening section, he does not devote any separate section to Sundarar. Sundarar's life is interwoven with the lives of many of his contemporaries but Sekkilar has taken only the lives of Eyar Kone Kalikkamar and Seraman Perumal (Kalaritru-arivar) to continue the story of Sundarar from the opening section and concludes the story with a separate end-section dealing with the ascent of Saint Sundarar to Kailas mounted on a white elephant which came from Kailas to fetch him. The verses dealing with Sundarar taken together are quite large in number - 879 verses.

Sundarar lived in the days of the Pallava Emperor Rajasimha (686-705 A.D.). Later when Emperor Rajaraja Chola (985-1014) had all the *Devaram* hymns unearthed at Chidambaram, arranged, and set to music by another boy-devotee Nambiyandar Nambi, this Nambi had sung a song of 89 verses, each verse giving at greater length the story of each saint and each group of saints. This was by 1010 A.D. More than a century later, Saint

Sekkilar, the Chief Minister of Emperor Kulottunga Chola II (1133-1150) wrote the epic hagiography, the *Tiruttondar Puranam*, popularly known as *Periya Puranam*, very elaborately in 4253 verses, by 1139-1140 A. D. He wrote the biographies not only using the lines of Sundarar and Nambiyandar Nambi, but also using local legends, his own first hand knowledge of the places and shrines, and the various histories that he knew personally and through his own enquiry and research. Thus the *Periya Puranam* is a unique record of the pathway to God trod by many men and women here in Tamilnad, which could be the pride of any nation. It is not a mere chronicle. It is the portrait of a democracy of the lovers of God and godly men, of servitude and surrender, of self-effacement and the joy resulting therefrom. Sacrifices undreamt of are demanded of the servitors who rise to the occasion and always come out in flying colours. The stories transcend the barriers of time and space, caste, class and creed, and always shine as a glorious beacon light to uplift and ennoble man and take him to heights which he would never have dreamt that he could scale.

The Saints are usually counted as 63. Saint Sundarar has mentioned in his poem only the names of 60 saints. In the concluding verse he just mentions that he is the son of Sadaiyanar and Isaijnaniyar. Sekkilar adds the names of these parents and the name of Sundarar also to the list of the 60, thus arriving at the number 63.

In the following chronicle we shall give an account of each saint in the order in which he is mentioned by Sundarar and elaborated by Sekkilar.

The line from Sundarar's *Tiruttondattotai* referring to each saint is given here in translation at the opening of each story. The verse sung on each by Nambiyandar Nambi (vide section 3 under the Appendix) will be most instructive, but for want of space we have not given it here.

In every case we have attempted to highlight the life of service to God and godly men. Where possible, a few words on the relevance of each story is given, as a kind of commentary. In a few cases, additional paragraphs have been added from popular lore. Reference is made to popular legends in the cases of Nandanar and Somayaji marar. Besides, Saints Appar, Sambandhar, Sundarar, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Tirumular, Aiyadihal Kadavarkone and Seraman Perumal sang devotional songs which are collected into the Saiva Canon and special paragraphs are added on their work and philosophical contribution.

Sekkilar concerned himself only with the stories of the Saints who were listed by Saint Sundarar in his poem *Tirut-Tondat-Tohai* and so we too are concerned with the same 63 saints written upon by Sekkilar. *Periya Puranam* begins with the story of Saint Sundarar and so this English volume also commences with his life. A survey of the mission and message of the Saints is prefixed to the stories. After the first story, the stories of the other 62 saints are here given in the serial order in which they are enumerated by Saint Sundarar.

Besides the 63 saints, there are nine groups of saints mentioned by Saint Sundarar, in line 1 of verses 1 and 7 and verse 10 of his *Tirut-Tondat-Tohai*. These are taken out and given together here as a separate section at the end under the title, 'Groups of Saints' with a note on the significance of the groups. There are three canonized women saints in the 63; there are yet some more who command our respect and admiration, although they are not mentioned as saints separately. The section on Women Saints deals with them.

Two points are to be remembered here. One is that Saint Sundarar had not exhausted all the names of the Saints who had lived before him and had surrendered themselves to Siva, and the other is that there have been equally important Saints even after Saint Sundarar.

Sundarar sang the *Tiru-Tondat-Tohai*, the list of the names of the men of God, on the spur of the moment without any preparation but of course through on inspiration from God Himself. It was therefore not possible for him to think or plan the subject and make it exhaustive. As we have pointed out elsewhere, Tilakavati, sister of Saint Tirunavukkarasu, deserves to be named as a Saint in her own right. The author of *Tiru Muruhatruppadaï* has equally a good claim to be called a Saint. The omission of these and similar others is explained by the fact that the list was not a pre-considered one.

Though Saint Sundarar had mentioned the servants of God upto his own day, Sekkilar has not done so. He did not cover the period from Sundarar to his own day. He limited his great work only to be an elaboration of the stories of the saints mentioned by Sundarar. He did not add any. For example, Nambiyandar Nambi, King Gandaraditta Chola who had sung a poem on Nataraja in the *Tiru Isaippa* and Karuvur Devar who has ten songs in the same compilation, and the most important Saint Manikkavacakar should have been included. The services of Queen Sembiyan madevi, Queen of Gandaradittar, are very well known and Sekkilar would certainly have known her glorious temple building work and temple benefactions. But since Sekkilar did not like to deviate from Sundarar he has not mentioned any of them.

Again in the history of Saivism, the list of *Canonized* saints begins and ends with the list of Sundarar and the canonical books stop with Sekkilar's great work. Further books have not been added by posterity. Hence we do not find the names of many eminent later day saints enumerated in any list of saints.

An Appendix contains the lives of some more Saints in Saiva history which are significant in different ways. Saint Manikkavacakar the fourth Saiva Samaya

Acharya, Saint Sendanar who sang a pallandu poem on Lord Nataraja, Saint Nambiyandar Nambi, who elaborated Sundarar's poem in a longer *antadi* poem, and Saint Sekkilar himself who has written the *Periya puranam* are then dealt with in separate sections.

It is not as though Saivism had not grown after Sekkilar. There have been many great Saints since his days and the lives of three typical saints are added on here. Saint Arunagirinathar holds aloft the banner of Saivism through song as the *Devargam* singers had done: for him the Supreme is Muruha, the son of Siva and his religion and philosophy are not in any way different from the earlier writers. Saint Pattinattar, we may call a folk poet and philosopher, brought the supreme truths of philosophy to the common man. Saint Tayumanavar of a later day coming in the same line of singers attempted to synthesize the philosophical thoughts of the Saivas, the Advaitins and the Siddhar and their religious practices. His is a personal cry of self-effacement in the highest forms of poetry.

The stories of all these saints find a place in the Appendix.

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THE SAIVA SAINTS

Saints have lived in all countries at different times. Their appearance marks the evolution of the particular race in the realm of the spirit. Mankind has been going through a conscious process of evolution and, in the process, the material plane through gradual stages has given place to the spiritual plane. The story of the saints is the history of the growth and development of the ideals of human society from the physical to the spiritual values.

Tamil literary history tells us that the early Tamils were great warriors, imbued with a high sense of loyalty

THE SAIVA SAINTS

to the clan and with patriotism. Physical valour was held in high esteem. Women were great heroines in this that they cared to nurture only brave soldiers and mighty warriors; they would rather die than accept that their offspring was a coward. Early Tamil history reminds us of Spartan glory in this field. Along with this ideal, we find that other virtues, such as chivalry, giving to the needy, and respect for the learned, also counted as great qualities among the people and their rulers. These were not individual traits but national characteristics. No song was sung in those ancient days which did not glorify one or the other of these qualities. The ancient rulers were all protectors of the meek, champions for the oppressed, munificent givers to the needy, and servants of the learned and the wise. "Let your crowned head bow before the palms of the learned, raised to bless you. Let your ever proud umbrella, the insignia of royal supremacy, be lowered, when you go round the temple of Siva in worship" sings a poet before a Pandiya prince, in the centuries before Christ.

We see a change, a few centuries after Christ. These ideals - the virtue of chivalry, benefaction and humility before the learned - gradually evolved themselves into the protection of the men of God, humility before them, submission to their will and surrender of everything to them, and to God. These personal qualities, no doubt noble traits in any age, have now been sublimated into a national philosophy of love of God and godly men. The political climate of the country was conducive to such an evolution. The land gave rich yields of food and people had no physical wants. The Pallava administration had brought under one rule many petty chieftaincies and had conferred relative peace under its umbrella. People were now enabled to direct their attention to other areas of activity than mere existence; spiritual values began to be fostered.

To the glory of the early Chola monarchs it should be said that even during the Kalabhra occupation of the Pandinad and their incursions into the Chola and the Pallava territory

Kochengat Chola in the fifth century A. C. had built seventy temples to Siva in brick and mortar on a raised base and probably a few to Vishnu as recorded very admiringly and gratefully by Saint Tiru Mangai Alvar of the Vaishnava Canon and mentioned as seventy eight temples to Siva by Saint Appar in the earlier century.

The Pallava period in South Indian history is a very important era in the spiritual evolution of the people. They had began scooping out temples from rock, turning caves into temples for God, and re-building the brick and mud temples in granite. The temples thus built satisfied the higher needs of the people - the desire to be of use and service in a selfless way, the longing to see and enjoy handsome things associated with the Divine, and the yearning to dwell and meditate on things beyond the material plane. Thus was ushered in the age of the Saints in Tamilnad. The saints, we should remember, were not exponents of any abstract philosophy, but they emphasized living, and living right now, in the present. This is the significant contribution of the saints to the race. In other words, they were able to perceive a higher Truth which they believed was worth living for, working for, and even dying for.

Thus we find a new era ushered in, what is called the era of the *Bhakti* cult. In the wave of political calm and peace, people were able to turn their minds to other things. They went about from place to place chanting Tamil hymns and offering worship. Huge granite edifices dedicated to God rose up, not only through an abundance of material wealth but also through the abundance of love and willing service at all levels, from royalty down to the common man. Architecture, sculpture and painting developed. Music and dance attracted people to the temple. All art was dedicated to God. Annual and monthly festivals were conducted in the temples, when people of all levels in society shared in the worship and experienced a soulful satisfaction. Vedic rituals perhaps, were gradually superceded by a new order of temple rituals which absorbed

more and more of the people's spoken language and customs. The temple grew to be the centre of life for society at all levels. Royalty had the expression of its life and glamour in the temple and the life of the people of all classes and castes revolved round the temple.

Such was the background against which we have to understand the hagiology and the hagiolatry of the country. Saints have existed among all races and in all religions but they have had a continuous and unbroken living influence among the Tamil people from a very early era. Leaving alone Sanskrit origins, we know they are known here as *Adiyar* or *Tondar* (the servant). Because these saints had considered themselves the lowliest of the low, they have been raised to be the highest of the high, by the people and by the crowned monarchs.

Spiritually evolved souls have appeared in the Tamil nad from ancient times, who had always placed themselves in the presence of God. We have a glorious history of such saints upto the twelfth century A.C. They had, even from their birth or early life, their entire being in God. Some had turned godly by divine intervention. Some had to struggle through obstacles to reach their goal of oneness with God. But they had all succeeded in overcoming all hindrances and risen to spiritual superhuman heights. In some cases, the saints had not hesitated to give up their every thing - not only their possession and kith and kin, but even their lives, when they could not live up to their ideals. The stories of some important saints such as Chandesar and Kannappar and probably Nandanar too, had been very ancient in the centuries B.C. while those of Tirumular and Karaikkal Ammai were quite new in the era. The pilgrim tours of Saints Appar and Sambandhar and Sundarar made new tidal waves of devotion and dedication surge through the length and breadth of the land. Most of the saints belong to this period and the age of the Saints is otherwise known as the age of the *Bhakti* movement. This period covers roughly about six centuries, from the

VII to the XII. We are able to remember the saints of a short period (before 700 A.D.) through the enumeration made by Saint Sundarar in a poem.

The origin of the poem itself is characteristic. Sundarar was entering the large Tiru Arur temple in the heart of Cholanad as usual for his daily worship one day, when a humble devotee standing in the outer hall saw him. He exclaimed: "How dare this Sundarar offer worship to the Lord, without first offering obeisance to his devotees?" The story is that Sundarar heard this, returned to the Hall, bowed before the assembled devotees and sang the poem, through divine inducement, that he was the servant of the servants of God. Herein he listed all the Siva bhaktas that he had known and heard of from the earliest period to his day. This reveals only the basic tenets of the Saiva cult, namely that worship of the man of God is even more meritorious than the worship of God Himself, because this alone will give the worshipper true humility and help him to subdue his ego.

In a sense this concept is not peculiar to Saivism. We find it in Vaishnavism where Madhurakavi, who had not sung a single song on Vishnu or worshipped Him, is hailed as an Alvar (saint) for having worshipped Saint Nammalvar and sung his praises in a song of ten verses.

This position has been enunciated by Saint Tirumural very briefly but emphatically in his verse "Love is God". Truth has many faces here and the saints emphasized the different facets through their different lives and utterances. We find the author of *Kural* giving a negative emphasis to the doctrine of Tirumular: "The crown of all virtues is non-killing; next comes non-lying". Mahatma Gandhi in our day has re-emphasized these values of *Kural*, by giving them a positive significance - *Ahimsa* (non-violence or Love) and *Satya* (Truth). This in brief has been the cult of the Saiva Saints.

Sekkilar, the hagiographer, gives us in a succinct compass the idea of a Saint: "They have the richest bounty where adversity as well as prosperity has ceased to exist. To them a pebble or a piece of gold makes no difference. Their firmness is such that they do not even covet the heavens but long only to bow before the Lord with the fulness of heart. Their only ornament is a necklace of rudraksha beads; their raiment is nothing but rags; their only purpose is the service of the Lord. But their heart is overflowing with love and compassion, therefore they have no wants in this life. How can I set forth their spiritual fortitude?" Sekkilar has placed these lines in his preface to his history of the Saints.

The story of two saints belongs perhaps to the years prior to the dawn of known Tamil history. Of the two, one belongs to the lowest and the other to the highest caste and both attained sainthood by ultra-human acts which in normal beings would be construed as crime. They are Saint Kannappar and Saint Chandesar.

Kannappar was the young son of a hunter chief, who went out on his maiden hunt with his companions. He was an unlettered man, with no knowledge of God or temple and no familiarity with religious observances. As he was going up a small hillock, he saw before him an image of Siva in a small temple on the hill. He had never been to a temple before, but immediately, some chords in his emotional being snapped and he was overwhelmed with an emotion never known before. He ran to the image, hugged. It, danced before It, and went on in this manner, till he felt hungry. His story is well known. He fed the image with fresh meat - because he had known no other food himself. When later the temple priest came and saw the desecration in the temple, he the was very sad. In order to show him the depth of the love of the hunter, Siva made it appear that blood was oozing from his eyes. The hunter, saw the blood and knowing that a wounded eye could be healed by replacement with a healthy eye, plucked out his two eyes

one by one and applied them to the image. Love such as this was never before known and the hunter was thenceforth known as Kannappar, one who applied his eye.

The story of Chandesar is similar. He was a small brahmin boy, but given the work of grazing cows. He was so very attentive to the needs of the cows that under his care they all grew up so sturdy and healthy that they had always a surfeit of milk which was overflowing in their udder. The little boy saw this milk, and intending to utilise it for a religious purpose, heaped a handful of sand on the river bank as a symbol of God's image and poured the overflowing milk on it. When this went on for a long time, the villagers came to know of it. They called his father and scolded him for the 'wasteful' manner in which the boy was using the cow's milk. The father, intending to verify the truth of the allegation, concealed himself and found the boy actually pouring milk on a handful of sand. In a great rage he kicked off the milkpail with his foot. The little boy saw what happened. We may say the boy was in a trance in his self-appointed work of worship of the image. Seeing what happened, he just took a piece of stick lying nearby and with it severed the leg of the offender, who dared to hinder his worship. Never for a moment did he pause to consider that the offender was a brahmin, his own father; an unpardonable offence had been committed and was fittingly punished.

The greatest figures among the Saiva Saints are the four -Appar, Sambandhar, Sundarar and Manikkavachakar, who are also called the Acharyas or religious preceptors. Their story is not mere legend, but they are historical figures. The first two were contemporaries and lived in the first half of the seventh century, while the other two lived in the next two centuries respectively. These four have been responsible for the greatness and the enduring universal character of the Saiva religion as we find it today. They had toured the country, visiting important shrines on the way and singing songs set to music in a popular language

and thereby they have captured the imagination of all classes of the people and set them a goal in life to work for and live for. No wonder their hymns had become the greatest thing in the lives of the people, greater than anything in life—possessions, kith and kin, and even God Himself. Such was the magic spell of the hymns interwoven with deep piety, and the mystic God-experience of the authors themselves, of course couched in the most poetic language.

These four preceptors are considered to typify in their lives the four-fold paths leading to God-experience. These are humble service to God, ceremonial worship, God-realisation, (or yoga) and the righteous way of life. These paths are not mutually exclusive but always overlap, and every one has the elements of all the other three too manifested in his life and action. But this kind of arrangement seems to have been made for easy comprehension and so can conveniently be adopted. They are respectively known as charya or dasa marga, kriya or satputra marga, yoga or saha marga and jnana or san-marga.

Manual service is the principle which governed the life of Saint Appar. The images of all the saints have been installed in the major temples and invariably we find a small weeding hoe in the hands of Appar in all of them. Appar has sung quite a large volume of hymns in very many temples and some of them are the most moving. They portray the independence of the spirit and challenge any extraneous authority, while at the same time enunciating a universal philosophy of love and service. But he was not content with singing. When he entered a temple, his first act was to apply himself to the task of cleaning the temple premises. This is a noble example well worth emulating in any age.

But we should remember that Appar received sustenance in all his physical service, in his singing, and in fact in his very existence only from his inward experience of God, which he is never tired of mentioning. He strove hard to realise God and as a result of his unceasing and selfless efforts he had god-realisation. All his life incidents should

be interpreted in this light. He was a very aged man, while Sambandhar was yet a boy' not yet in his teens, but unobtrusively Appar had mingled with the palanquin bearers and was carrying Sambandhar. It was again this humility which made him dissuade the boy Saint from going among aliens in the Pandiya country, and offer to go himself in order to restore Saivism there. We have a real insight into the nature of his efforts, when we are told that he walked on towards Kailas, the abode of the Father in Heaven, and in the process, his limbs such as his feet, his legs, and his arms were worn away. Then he began to walk on his head and, when he found that even this had a limit, lo! he had the divine vision. He saw the entire Universe as God - God in his two aspects of Sivam and Sakti-Intellect and Power. This is perhaps the best symbolic narration of the greatest mystic experience - not only the experience of God, but the truth that this experience is to be had, not through any conscious effort of man alone, but only through Divine will.

Sambandhar popularly said to typify the life of a son of God, was a boy. Divine Grace entered him at the age of three and his life ended at sixteen. During this short span, he has toured more places, sung more hymns, and performed more miracles than all the other three. His songs do not appear to have the note of submission and humility but possess the confidence arising out of inner strength, which is often mistaken by others for vanity. Because of his inner strength, he never entreats. But there is always in his life the humility and absolute surrender which are the marks of godly man. when he entered the city of Madurai at the invitation of the Queen to reclaim the people back into the Saiva fold, his first act was to go to the temple, supplicate before the Lord and seek guidance for his work. He was an young boy and naturally his heart felt for the suffering of the others. He never asked for anything for himself. His whole life was a series of pleadings on others' behalf. He pleaded for relief from pain for the daughter of the Kolli-chief, for relief for his followers from the severity of the winter cold, for relief from the serpent's poison in the young merchant on behalf of his betrothed, for help for his followers at a time of famine in Vilimilalai, for

divine help to himself in restoring Saivism in Madurai, for help to a devotee at Tiruvottur by making male palm trees yield fruit, and lastly for the restoration to life of Pumpavai from the ashes preserved by her father. His very end is also significant. He sent all the people assembled to witness his wedding into the Divine Effulgence which lit up the temple, and himself entered last. Such was the life of Jnana-Sambandhar, one of infinite confidence and strength and purpose. It is indeed hard to follow.

Sundarar we may say walked with God. God was ever immanent with this devotee. In the life of Sundarar we have the concept of God as the Just, the stern Dispenser of Karma. Just because God is his comrade, ever present with him Sundarar is not permitted to transgress the path of right conduct. When there is transgression, immediate punishment is meted out; there is no mitigation. In other aspects, He is the servant of this servant.

Manikkavacakar represents in his life, the good life, the conscious process of the evolution of the soul, its release from material bonds, its struggles and pangs, and final realisation and union with Him. The songs of Manikkavacakar are known as Tiru-vacakam. For depth and poignancy of feeling and the joy and peace of God-realisation, they are unequalled. They have moved the Tamil people through the centuries as no others have done. Yet this author has been called more of a mystic than the others. This is perhaps because we see in the songs of the other three saints, fully evolved souls. They had realised God in themselves and are at peace. But here, in the songs of Manikkavacakar, we are given an insight into the spiritual life of the author. We have here a glimpse of his mental pangs and agony of separation, then the joy of temporary realisation, re-union and the resultant peace, then the forgetting, the search, the struggles and again realisation. It is not possible for us, lay people, to follow spiritually realised souls through all their streaggles. Hence this poet is called more of a mystic. Yet his experiences and their expression come closest to our own and that is the secret of their spell over the people.

In the history of the Saints, three women saints stand out as exponents of independent action in the service of God. The earliest from the point of time is Punitavati, known as the lady of Karaikkal. Some of her miraculous actions puzzled her husband who was an average but affluent merchant. He left her to go to a distant place, there married again and carried on a brisk trade. When confronted with his first wife, he fell at her feet with his family saying, "This is no human being: this is an angel". The pious young wife thereupon discarded her physical body and in the form of a ghost sang the praise of God in a number of beautiful lyrics, which give out at the same time, the highest Saiva philosophy. Posterity collected her verses and displayed its respect for her by calling her songs "The Elder Hymns". Her songs are the most remarkable pieces in all the canonical Books in this, that they lovingly dwell on the immanent form of the personal God, while at the same time expounding the highest philosophy that He is the Absolute, the Transcendental Being; the Knower, the instrument of knowledge, and knowledge itself.

The other two have not sung any songs but have been associated with two of the greatest hymn singers. Tilakavati is the symbol of the traditional orthodox womanhood. When she heard that the young man whom her parents had proposed as her bridegroom died in battle, she prepared to give up her life, but continued to live at the request of her younger brother as his guardian. She sought divine intervention to reclaim him from an alien fold and the young man thereafter began to sing soul stirring hymns on Siva and came to be known as the Prince of Words (Navuk-karasu) and he is our Saint Appar. She lived a celibate life of prayer and service to God to the end of her days.

The other lady was the Queen of the Pandiya empire at Madurai. She was a noble regal figure, a clever diplomat, but at the same time, the flower of womanhood. Coming of an ancient Saivite royal family, she could not tolerate the alien religion which her king and his entire kingdom had embraced. She was seeking for an opportunity for

reclaiming all of them. Through her own intelligence service, she came to know of the boy-saint Sambandhar and his greatness. Very diplomatically she invited him to her City and through affectionate means managed to reconvert her husband the King and all the people back to the Saiva fold. Sambandhar has immortalised her devotion and royal grace in his hymns.

The lives of the Saints gives the lie to the general belief that birth confers greatness on one. Saints Nandanar and Nilakanta-Yalp-pana were born as harijans, but by their devotion and service, have come to be respected by the highest in the land. Mahatma Gandhi calls Nandan, 'the first Satyagrahi'; he says: "He did not swear against his persecutors; he would not even condescend to ask his persecutors for what was his due. But he shamed them into doing justice by his lofty prayer, by the purity of his character, and if one may put it in human language, he compelled God Himself to descend and made Him open the eyes of his persecutors". The other, Nilakanta, was a musician of the lowest caste, but by dedicating his music to God, he was taken into the retinue of Saint Sambandhar, a high caste brahmin, and attained final beatitude along with him.

The saints converted others to the Saivite fold but harboured no animosity against any one. The story of Saint Saakhya illustrates this. He was a Buddhist, but he thought of God every day before food, and threw a stone at his image in the place of a flower. This was accepted by God as such and Saakhya is also counted a Saivite Saint.

Physical handicap is no bar to the services of God. Dandi was born blind. He could not see the image of God in the temple with the physical eye. But he did not despair of being useful. He allowed his mind always to dwell on God inwardly and seeking out ways of being of service, set himself to the task of excavating the temple tank, which had been partially filled. Evidently, he did not agree with Milton, who resigned himself, when he became blind, to God's will, saying, "they also serve who only stand and

wait''. With pole and rope to guide his hands, Dandi performed the excavation work successfully.

Many of the saints had set themselves a limited purpose in life, in the service of God. Kalaya, in direst adversity, could not desist from his self-appointed task of burning incense at the Lord's shrine. When his wife gave him her *tirumangalya* to be exchanged for food articles, Kalaya exchanged it for incense, while the family was starving! When Tayar, who was giving red rice daily to the temple to be presented to the Lord, spilled the basket of offerings into the mud, he would rather die than live when his vow could not be fulfilled. When there was no food grain in the house to feed the visiting mendicant, Mara of Ilayankudi gathered the sprouting paddy from the fields for his wife to get a meal prepared. Appudi, a high caste brahmin, named all his public utility services after Saint Tiru Navukkarasu whom he adored. Many are the saints who gave up their lives when they were unable to serve God's men or when they failed in their vows to serve God.

The history of nations as well as of individuals is governed by symbols. Ideas of a flag and an anthem go along with the idea of a nation. There is no nation without these insignia of nationhood. We know in all countries and in all ages thousands of people had died for the honour of their flag. The flag is just a little symbol of their nation's glory.

Similarly, the sacred ash, the rudraksha beads, the Lord's name, the Saiva mendicant's garb are all symbols to the worshipper of Siva. He is prepared to sacrifice anything to uphold the glory of these. There are many stories of Saints to illustrate this.

The story of Meypporul is unique. He worshipped the sacred ash, as a symbol of Siva, and when his adversary came to him treacherously wearing the ash and stabbed him to death, he ordered his aide to escort him unharmed outside his state. Such forgiveness is heard of only in the life of Christ and of Mahatma Gandhi. Enadi-nathar is another

such valiant soldier. He allowed himself to be killed by his adversary wearing the sacred ash.

Loyalty to a symbol is not acquired in a day. In newly independent India, we are yet to learn loyalty to the national flag and the national anthem. The stories of many of the saints hand down to us rich traditions of such loyalty from the hoary past,

There are some whose devotion took to violent forms. Eripattar slashes down the royal elephant and its attendants because it trampled down the flowers taken by a devotee to the temple. Seruttunai cuts off the nose of the queen who dared to smell a flower in the temple, intended for God. Her husband the King considers this punishment not enough and cuts off her offending hand which took the flower. Kotpuli slashes down all those, not excepting even a little infant, that used the rice intended for feeding godly men. Satti deems it his duty to cut off the tongues of those who speak ill of godly men.

Certain acts like gambling are prohibited in an ethical way of living. But Muruhar gambles successfully and uses his gains for feeding men of God. Munaiyaduvar works as a mercenary soldier and with the wage earned feeds men of God.

There are others who obtained bliss, not by any spectacular activity, but by very simple means. Rudrapasupati by his chanting the *Rudra mantra*, Anayar by his singing the *Panchakshara mantra* in music on his flute. Atibhakta the fisherman by casting always into the sea one fish as an offering to God even though he was starving, Nesar by weaving and presenting clothing to godly men, Gananatha by running a school to train devotees in performing services for God Siva, and so on.

There are some who attained bliss by merely worshipping men of God. Appudi worshipped Appar Somayaji marar befriended Sundarar, and Kurumbar mentally worshipped Sundarar.

The ways of some in trying to fulfil their own principles of service to godly men are strange indeed. Amarniti gives away his wife. Murtti grinds his own arm in the place of sandal wood. Kanampullar burns his hair as a wick, and Kaliya uses his blood as oil for the temple lamp. Naminandi is able to burn water in the place of oil for the temple lamp. An extreme case is that of Siru Tondar who carves up his own first born to feed a Siva bhakta.

In very many large temples of Tamilnadu which have space and adequate financial resources, images (in stone) are installed for the 63 nayanmar on the southern *prakara mandapa* and they are offered worship. Several temples have bronze icons for all the sixty three. The annual festival in the Mayilappur Kapalisvarar temple on one of the days of its annual *brahmotsava* festival is called the Arupattumuvar festival. On that day the bronze icons are taken in several vimanas along the four main streets around the temple with great pomp. The festival usually attracts a hundred thousand people from the city and around. In like manner, the stories of some of the saints are celebrated as major festivals in the temples associated with them – Tiru Nilakanthathu Kuyavanar in Chidambaram. Appar at Tirup-Puhalur, Sambandhar at Sikali and Achalpuram (Nallurpperumanam where he attained bliss), Sundarar at Tiru Otriyur, Siruttondar at Tiruchengattankudi, Karaikkal Ammai at Karaikkal, Somayaji marar at Ambarmahalam and so on. These indicate how the lives of the Saints and the literature thereon had been kept fresh in the minds of the people over the eight hundred years after Sekkilar through annual festivals.

Besides, scores of musical operas had been written on the lives of the Saints collectively and individually in the centuries 19 and 20 and they are annually rendered in *kalakshepams* musical operas and dramas throughout the land. Gopala Krishna Bharati's *Nandanar Charitram* is deservedly the most famous and its songs are today capable of melting even a heart of stone. Nandanar songs have become a "must" in the 20th century musical concerts. Mrs. Chitra Visvesvaran's rendering in abhinya of one song in particular, when Nandan

asks, "May I come near you, O Lord ? (Varuhalamo aiva?)" and her depiction of the story of Tiru Nilakanthar at Chidambaram as a musical *natya natakam*, as an offering to Lord Nataraja Himself within the very temple precincts are the most moving and remarkable in recent history.

To conclude. There have been saints from all communities -harijans, potters, farmers, brahmins, weavers, princes and the like. Women have always been helpmates to their husbands in their religious duties. They appear to be really the more resourceful partners. Some women had also been canonized as saints. The lives of the Saiva Saints give us, even in the 20th century, not only guidance and solace in the spiritual field, but hold before us noble examples of a casteless society, where men and women are equal, where there is tolerance to other religions, where manual labour is respected, where people live for certain lofty ideals, where symbols are as much respected as the principles they symbolise. In short, the stories of the Saints is a synopsis of all that is best and noble and lasting in the one-world idea.

SAINT SUNDARAMURTI

The story of Saint Sundaramurti is unique among the stories of all the Saivite Saints and he himself holds a unique place among the Saints. He first enumerated the names of the 63 Saiva Saints in a song and this was later elaborated in the 12th century into a large epic of 4253 verses by the Saint historian, Sekkilar.

Legend says that Sundarar (the handsome) was an attendant of Lord Siva in the heavens and, because he cast a loving eye on two of the maids of Siva's Consort, all the three had to be born as mortals on earth till such time as they were fit to re-enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sundarar was born as the son of Sadaiyar and Isaijnaniyar in a family of temple priests, in a corner of modern South Arcot District. The local ruler was fascinated by the handsome child whom he saw playing on the road as he passed by. He took the child with the parents' permission to his royal home where it grew up in the traditions of both royalty and priesthood.

The time for the marriage of the young man arrived. According to custom, a bride was chosen for him in a neighbouring village by his parents and the bride-groom's party reached there. We always speak of divine intervention in the case of all saints at a particular stage in their lives, and that stage for Sundarar had arrived just now.

When the marriage ceremonies were about to begin, an old brahmin appeared before the assembled parties and declared that Sundarar was his slave. The whole assembly was aghast.

This claim naturally evoked disbelief and disdain, because no brahmin ever becomes a slave. When they pointed this out to the old man, he produced a document executed by Sundarar's grandfather, pledging himself and all his progeny in eternal bondage to the old man. Sundarar got very angry and tore off the document. This strengthened the argument against Sundarar. The stranger said that the torn document was only a copy of the original which was in safe keeping in nearby Tiru Vennai Nallur, his place. Thereupon Sundarar and his party followed the old man to this Nallur. He produced the original, which was found to be fully authentic, the signature was verified and found to tally and so Sundarar had to go out to serve the stranger. When asked to show his house, the old man took Sundarar and all the assembled people into the inner-most sanctum of the local shrine and there disappeared. Sundarar immediately realised that the old man was no other than the Lord Siva Himself, who had intervened to redeem him from worldly entanglements and take him back in due time to His celestial abode. At the bidding of the Lord, who named Sundarar as His *Tough Servant* because of his harsh words spoken while refuting his bondage, he began to sing the praise of God in melodious song.

The marriage was naturally dropped. From there Sundarar went to the various shrines in the country, singing sweet songs, proclaiming God's Grace and the duty of man to serve Him. A number of miraculous occurrences happened in his life, all of them calculated to point to his mission in life, namely to enjoy or suffer the fruits of his past deeds, and finally to attain His Sacred Feet.

Adihai is a nearby shrine where Divine Grace descended upon Saint Appar some time earlier. When Sundarar went there and was sleeping there one night, an old man was also lying down nearby, with his feet touching the head of Sundarar. When Sundarar remonstrated against this, the old man changed his place of sleep but again Sundarar felt his feet on his head. Again Sundarar objected asking "Who are you?", and the old man replied "Do you not know Me?"

The old man who had come there just to place His Feet on Sundarar's head, considered in religious language as *Tiruvadi dikshai*, disappeared. Sundarar now knew this was the Lord of Adihai. Then after worshipping at Chidambaram and Sikali the birth place of Tiru Jnana Sambandhar, he went to Tiru Arur.

Kamalini one of the celestial nymphs, whom Sundarar had seen in the heavenly regions, was born in Arur as a young damsel by name Paravai. They met by accident in the temple and had a longing for each other. By divine intervention they were married. While here, Sundarar sang his poem enumerating the names of all the devotees of God with the refrain that he, Aruran the servant of the Lord of Arur, was the servant of the servants of each of the devotees.

Many things happened here and hereafter in the life of Sundarar which are not easy for many to comprehend. Sundarar places himself in the role of a friend and comrade of the Lord God Himself and in that capacity goes on playing, entreating, ordering and complaining to that friend. He had never for a moment lost sight of the Omnipotence and Supremacy of the Lord nor of his own eternal bondage to Him. Yet he goes on playing with Him and ordering Him about. We may think of a parallel partly perhaps, in Arjuna and Krishna, where the two roles of lordship and comradeship do not exist together but only one at a time. In the case of Sundarar, however, he recognises God, both as his overlord and as his comrade, at the same time.

Whenever Sundarar was in difficulty, he prayed to God and his prayers were answered. Once there was no rice available anywhere on account of the failure of the monsoons. Paravai his wedded wife had no rice in her house. Kundaiyur Kilar, an admirer of Sundarar living in the nearby village of Kundaiyur was daily supplying rice and other provisions to Sundarar's household, but now he was unable to send anything. Naturally he was quite grief stricken and to dispel his grief, God filled this friend's house

and granaries with mounds and mounds of rice for being sent to Sundarar.

The friend showed this to Sundarar and asked him to arrange for its transport to his own house of the mountain of rice. Thereupon Sundarar prayed to the Lord and had it transported to Paravai's household by His minions. The rice was so much that Paravai could neither use it all nor store it in her house. So Sundarar announced by tomtom that whoever wanted it might take it and store it in their houses. This was accordingly done.

There lived a Saiva saint by name Kotpuli, a captain in the king's army, in another neighbouring village. He invited Sundarar to his place and offered him his two daughters for service. Sundarar accepted them and considered himself as the father of the two girls. Whenever he was singing songs in shrines later, he signed himself father of these girls.

Then again, Sundarar did not have the money required for poor feeding at the time of the temple festival of Panguni Uttiram which was fast approaching. He went to Tirup-Puhalur, expressed his anxiety in a song to the Lord, and laid Himself down to sleep with bricks for a pillow. When he woke up, all the clay bricks had been converted into bricks of gold !

Similar miraculous incidents happened to him in innumerable places. Visiting many shrines on the way he reached Tiru Mudukunru (modern city of Vriddhachalam in South Arcot district) Here he prayed for and got twelve thousand gold coins. He desired to deposit the gold there itself and draw it at Arur, Paravai's place. By divine command, he dropped the gold in the river there and finally after visiting many shrines on the way, reached Tiru Arur. There, having his wife Paravai by his side, he searched for the gold in the tank but did not get it immediately. His wife naturally taunted him. Then he prayed and was able to locate it and take it out. He tested the gold and assured himself that it was not of inferior carat quality!

Then again, he began his tour of shrines. When he was very hungry at a place called Tiruk-Kuruhavur, the Lord appeared in the guise of a brahmin and fed him and his party. After touring many places, he reached Tiruk-Kachur in Tondainadu. Himself and party were very hungry. As usual the Lord appeared in the guise of a brahmin, begged for alms in all the houses there and brought the alms and fed him and party.

Continuing his tours, Sundarar then reached Tiru-Otriyur. Aninditai, the second of the celestial nymphs mentioned earlier, was born here with the name of Sangili. She was weaving flower garlands for the Lord in the local temple. When her parents tried to find a bridegroom for her, she declared that she would wed only one who was enveloped in Siva's grace. When Sundarar saw her, he fell in love with her. He prayed to Siva to unite her to him. The Lord instructed Sangili in her dream to wed Sundarar. When she pointed out that he was already married, He told her he would promise never to leave her. Here a trick is played on Sundarar by Siva. When Sundarar asked Him to go to the shade of the temple tree (mahizh) so that his promise to Sangili in the temple might not be religiously binding, Siva agreed, but instructed Sangili to make him give his promise not in the temple but under the tree! Thus He foiled the plan of Sundarar to give the promise in the temple from which Siva had gone away. Sundarar could not now help giving her the promise under the tree and was duly wedded.

As he was living there happily with her, spring came and with it memories of his worship of the Panguni Uttaram festival at Tiru Arur in the company of his first wife Paravai. He could then stay at Tiru Otriyur no longer and so, contrary to his promise to Sangili, he left Tiru Otriyur and wended his way to Arur.

The moment he left Otriyur, he lost the vision of both eyes. He realised this was a punishment for his breaking his promise to Sangili. Deeply grieved, he prayed for and got a

blind man's staff on the way at Tiruvenbakkam. He plodded on and at the famous city of Kanchi got back the vision of his left eye. Then again at Tirut-Turutti (modern Kuttalam in Tanjavur district) he was rid of an ailment afflicting his body on bathing in the temple tank. He reached Arur, prayed and got his sight restored in the right eye also.

The poor man had further rebuffs here. Knowing of his second marriage at Otriyur, Paravai refused to see him. However, Lord Siva intervened as usual and went to her twice at dead of night as messenger for Sundarar. Paravai was pacified, and he had again a peaceful life at Arur. However, another devotee by name Kalikkamar living at Perumangalam heard of the Lord's intercession and was very much upset in his heart against Sundarar, who had the audacity to employ the Lord for settling family quarrels. The Lord however, desired the two devotees to be friends. So He caused Kalikkamar to suffer from a severe colic, told him that Sundarar alone could cure it, and also ordered Sundarar to go to him. Rather than be treated by 'sinful' Sundarar, Kalikkamar decided to give up his life by tearing asunder his own bowels with a dagger. When Sundarar came there and saw this, he was much moved by the devotion of Kalikkamar. Grabbing Kalikkamar's dagger, he was about to kill himself, when by the Grace of God, Kalikkamar came back to life. The two men became fast friends.

The ruler of the Sera country, by name Seraman Perumal became an intimate friend of Sundarar. Seraman himself is a canonised Saint and he has sung a number of poems in praise of the Lord. When the two went to worship at Tiruvaivaru, the river Kaveri was in full floods. Thereupon Sundarar sang a song in praise of the Lord, when the floods stopped, allowing the friends to pass to the northern bank of the river to worship at the shrine. Then Sundarar accompanied Seraman to his capital city, stayed with him some time and returned with a considerable bounty gifted by him. On the way, robbers waylaid him and snatched away the presents. He prayed to the Lord and got back the lost presents.

During another trip to Seraman's capital city later, he caused, by prayer to the Lord in the local temple, a crocodile to bring forth an young boy eaten up by it many years earlier. After a short stay in the city of Tiru Anjaikkalam he prayed to the Lord to take him back to the heavens. Accordingly, says the legend, a white elephant came forth from the heavens and carried him back to Kailas.

Such is the story of Sundarar much more complex than the lives of either Appar and Sambandhar. He exemplified in his life his consciousness of both the immanence and the transcendence of God.

Saint Sundarar was the third of the four spiritual preceptors of the Saivites. He is said to have lived round a. d. 700. (c. 690 to 708 a. d.).

2.

We see a superhuman element introduced even at the birth of Sundarar. He was an attendant of God Himself in the celestial regions in the name of Alala-sundarar. He was fascinated by the beauty of two nymphs who were attending on Sakti, the consort of Siva there. Saivism, along with all the other branches of Hinduism, has the doctrine of karma at the root of all its philosophy. Any man has to reap the fruits of his actions, bad as well as good; action meant not only deeds, but also thoughts. In this sense, Sundarar had to be born on this earth as a mortal and expiate his action in having had a fascination for the two nymphs. Hence his birth in this world.

When Lord Siva came in the guise of an old brahmin to claim Sundarar as His slave. Sundarar called him, "You mad fellow." So when he told the Lord here that he did not know how to sing on Him, He suggested to him, "Ycu called us mad fellow. Now begin your song with the words 'Mad fellow (pittan).'" St. Sundarar's song begins with the word 'pitta'.

The marriage of Sundarar arranged by his parents in the usual course was stopped by the intervention of God Himself, who granted Sundarar the gift of singing melodious songs. Sundarar thereafter toured the Tamil country, visiting various shrines and singing God's praise. One of the celestial nymphs was born at Tiru-Arur as a young damsel by name Paravi. When Sundarar went to Arur, he saw her, fell in love with her, and appealed to God to unite her to him.

The relationship which Sundarar claimed with God is some thing unique among Hindu legends. He orders Him about as a comrade while at the same time he does not forget His supremacy and his own bondage to serve him. Several miracles happen at the prayers of Sundarar to help Him on in this life.

After a long period of pilgrimage and wanderings, Sundarar finally reached Tiru Otriyur. Here he met the second celestial nymph born as a young maiden named Sangili. He fell in love with her and desired to marry her. As was his habit he prayed to God to help him. Sangili, however, was a young girl who had determined to devote her life to the service of God, with no thought of marriage. The Lord of Otriyur appeared in her dream and asked her to marry Suudarar. She agreed but, being a very shrewd girl, reminded Him that Sundarar was already wedded to Paravai at Arur. He remembered this and so made Sundarar promise her never to leave her. Sundarar promised, and accordingly the marriage took place.

Sundarar was then living with Sangili happily. Spring came. He was immediately reminded of the spring festival at Arur. He sings :

*“ My Lord of Arur
Thou art the Sweet music,
the joy resulting from music,
and sweet nectar to me.
Thou art my comrade
and my comfort in all my vagaries.*

*Thou gavest me beautiful Paravai
and made me Thy slave,
How can I, pitiable fool that I am,
live away from Thee ? ”*

Of course he longed to go there and meet Paravai. So, casting his promise to the winds, he left Sangili and Otriyur, and started for Arur. The moment he crossed the limits of the town of Otriyur, he lost the vision of both of his eyes. He realised at once his breach of promise to Sangili, but would not stop. He prayed to the Lord of Otriyur : “My Lord, I became Thy servant, with all my faults. Accept me as I am, with my faults. Amidst all my follies, I had never failed to praise Thy name. Suggest some remedy for my eye sight. If it is Thy will that I be blind, grant me at least a blind man’s staff. Save me from being dragged at the end of a staff by a guide. When I call womenfolk in the house they will shout back, “Don’t call us, you blind fool ! ” How can I bear this? How can I live after losing my sight ? ”

The Lord did not restore his sight. Muttering against His unkindness, Sundarar proceeded on his travels to Arur.

The attributes of God are Truth, Justice, Mercy and similar divine qualities. But we find here that He does not allow Sundarar to take liberties with Him and does not show him any lenience when his conduct becomes unethical.

Sundarar continued his travels and some of his songs during this period, praying for relief from his affliction, are really in a strain of great humility, couched in simple but soulful and melodious language, poignant with deep feeling, with the conviction that he had erred and so had to suffer the fruits of his errant action before he could be pardoned. He sings at Tiru-mullai-Vayil :

*My Lord,
 I had always considered Thy feet
 as my greatest refuge
 and the greatest truth,
 and had by virtue of Thy indulgence
 cared for no one and
 perhaps indulged in improper conduct.
 Thou hast made me blind
 because of my failure to act up
 to my promise to Sangili.
 In Thy infinite mercy,
 relieve me from my affliction.*

Nothing happened here and again Sundarar proceeded to the next place, Tiru Venbakkam. In a few poignant verses he once again prayed for the Lord's forgiveness. "Lord. In the hope that Thou wouldst forgive my faults. I erred. But mercilessly Thou didst make me blind. When I have surrendered my entire self to Thy will, shouldst Thou not tolerate my faults? My Lord, dost Thou still remain in this temple, listening to my entreaties?" He continued: "After I had said all this, the Lord replied: Yes, We are here: you may go!". However, a blind man's staff was given to Sundarar here to feel his way and proceed.

In answer to his fervent prayers at Kanchipuram the great citadel of learning and culture, his vision in the left eye was restored. Sundarar thereupon expressed his gratitude in a poem of 11 verses extolling the praises of the Lord, in giving him at least one eye with which he could see His lustrous Form. Travelling south, in due course he reached Tirut-Turutti, a shrine in Tanjavur district. Here in accordance with the Divine Will, he bathed in the temple tank and a bodily disease, which was ailing him for some time, left him. Finally he reached Tiru Arur and there prayed to the Lord in words expressing his deep anguish and misery.

for the restoration of sight in his right eye also. "Lord, I am Thy slave, unswerving, I pray to none else. My agony is consuming my heart, and it saddens my face. When persons like me go to Thee and tell Thee our woes, Thou art silent and dost not show mercy. May Thou be blessed!"

When Sundarar sang in this manner, his sight returned and he was happy. He then sang a number of ecstatic verses on the Lord's mercifulness and then went to the house of Paravai, his wife at Arur. She had heard of his escapade at Otriyur and of his marriage with Sangili and so refused to see him. Again he prayed as usual to the Lord of Arur who interceded with Paravai on behalf of Sundarar at dead of night carrying Sundarar's message twice, and once again proper understanding was restored between the two. Then they lived happily for some time.

Meanwhile, however this interlude of God interceding with Paravai on behalf of Sundarar caused a great revulsion against Sundarar in the mind of Kalikkamar, a deeply religious man living about 40 miles from Arur. Sundarar heard of the anger and vexation of Kalikkamar and prayed to the Lord to pacify him. By divine will, a severe colic afflicted Kalikkamar and he was told that only Sundarar could cure him. Sundarar also was directed to go to Kalikkamar for the purpose. When Kalikkamar heard that Sundarar was approaching his place to effect his cure, he tore asunder his bowels rather than get cured by Sundarar. When Sundarar came there and saw this, he also decided to take his life, when again by God's will Kalikkamar came back to life and the two devotees were reconciled.

Once when Sundarar went to worship in the Arur shrine as usual, Saint Viral-Mindar had also come there for worship. There is a thousand pillared hall in the temple, where devotees of God congregate before and after worship, Viralmindar was staying in this hall along with others who had assembled for worship. He saw Sundarar going straight

into the sanctum, without pausing to pay his respects to the assembly of devotees gathered in the hall. He had heard of the repute of Sundarar as a devotee of God but had not so far met him. Now he was pained at the indifference of Sundarar towards men of God and exclaimed: "We consider Sundarar an alien, since he does not show respect to the Saiva devotees. We also consider the Lord who bestowed Grace on Sundarar, an alien!" Such was the stand which Viralmindar took. When Sundarar heard of this, he returned to the hall, paid obeisance to the men of God and sang a poem extolling the pious deeds of the holy men who had lived before his day. Siva guided him in composing this song by giving him the first line thereof. By virtue of the song, Sundarar came in later years to be counted as a holy man himself. This is the poem Tirutondat-Tohai in eleven verses which was the basis for Sekkilar's *Periya-puranam*.

Such in brief are the incidents in the life of saint Sundarar, where he was made to suffer for his unethical conduct. He might have been a comrade but that could not deflect the course of Divine Justice. Where he strayed from the accepted codes of ethical conduct, he had to undergo punishment and suffering in atonement. His role of a comrade did not confer on him any special privileges to behave as he pleased. That is the one lesson we learn from the life of Sundarar, a lesson which is very significant in the modern era, where, under the cloak of democracy, people are more prone to ask for their rights and special privileges, than to adhere to their own duties and to ethical behaviour. We see that pious men are the earthly manifestation of God and worship of God is not different from worship or service to such holy men, in other words, service to humanity.

We have had an insight into the life of Saint Sundarar and the lessons which that life teaches us. We have also seen how he called himself a companion of Siva and how this relationship did not save him from punishment and suffering whenever his conduct was unethical according to worldly standards.

Sundarar is said to have sung 38 thousand poems in praise of God enshrined in the various temples in the Tamilnad. But only 100 of his poems were available in the 10th-11th centuries and these run to 1,026 verses, all set to music (*pann*). These have been collected as the Seventh Book of the Saivite Canonical Books. They were actually sung by him during his visit to the temples for worship and they continue to be so sung in those temples by devotees even to this day. Each song has a tune called *raga* today but known as *pann* in the days of the Saints. Sundarar has sung a new *pann*, *senturutti*, not found in the songs of Saint Sambandhar. This points to the fact that there had been many more *panns* (tunes), but they had all disappeared.

Of the four pathways to God (or *margas*) in Saivite religious discipline, Sundarar is considered to typify the third path, *Yoga* or *sahamarga* (comradeship). Yoga has here its literal meaning, namely union, union of the individual self with the Cosmic Self; in Saivite parlance, it is the union of the soul at the Feet of God. Our Saint considered God as immanent, ever present with him and he has only to make a prayer to this immanent Being before God granted it or presented Himself before Him. This is what Sundarar implied when he spoke of God as a friend or companion.

He sings:

*My Lord, enshrined in the temple
at Kazhippalai!
Wherever Thy servant thinks of Thee,
Thou appearest then and there,
standest by me;
dost annul the fruits of my actions here
and dost accept me as Thy servant.*

Sundarar is not a recluse; he does not have any objection to the enjoyment of the good things of the world. The life of Saint Appar was one of absolute renunciation, surrender and self-effacement. We do not find anywhere that the other

Saint Sambandhar asked for the good things of life for himself. When they came, he took them in his stride; he did not ask for them; all that he asked for was only the relief from suffering for the afflicted humanity. But the story of Sundarar is of a different cast. Though born a Siva brahmin, he was brought up in a royal household, where naturally he was in the full enjoyment of all luxury. He married twice and doubtless suffered immensely also. But throughout his career, his attitude to life is one of fighting, and at the same time one of prayer. This is the keynote of all his songs. It is not easy to comprehend and reconcile these two mutually opposing aspects, but this is Sundarar and most of his songs reflect this attitude.

Saint Sundarar prayed to the Lord to give him food, gold, fine dress, trinkets and the like. He even asked for transport for food grains gifted to him by an admirer. When his eyesight was taken away from him, for his having broken his promise to his second wife Sangili, he prayed for a staff to lean on and then for the restoration of his sight. In all these prayers, his language is not one of meekness or submission, but one of taunting, challenge or even command. In all cases, his prayers are answered immediately or after a little delay. With all his challenge Sundarar calls himself a servant of the servants of God, and so, no wonder he was humoured by God.

This aspect of the personality of Sundarar brings home one truth, namely that once the individual has made a total surrender of himself to God, his outward actions or words do not very much matter; one can enjoy the good things of life and yet realise the highest bliss.

Sundarar frequently refers to God as the all-Merciful. God is always forgiving. Whatever faults there may be in us, whatever deceits there may be in our actions, He is always willing to ignore them and grant us all that we want for the mere asking. Those that are born on this earth will certainly reach the heavens if they sing His praises here and serve Him.

Sundarar has been thinking very much of the ills and miseries in the world and therefore he enjoins people to praise God's name, which will give them permanent relief from suffering. One of his favourite themes is helping others, giving food, relieving hunger and distress. God satisfies the hunger and cures the disease of those that sing his praises.

“O Ye Poets! why do you waste your breath singing eulogies on man? You bow before worthless people, praise them to the skies and exhaust all the terms in the language, but those undeserving people do not give you anything. Please therefore do not cringe before such miserly people hereafter. Go to the Tirup-Puhalur temple and sing the glory of the Lord there. He will lift you from all the ills of this life, give you proper food and clothing here, and take you to the heavens hereafter.”

And again: “Friends, Life is an illusion. Life is a prey to the pangs of hunger and to the cycle of births and deaths. Whatever you save and hoard is certain to be lost. Forget all that. Do good, distribute alms, and praise the Lord.”

He asks: “My Lord, what is this life after all? It is fleeting. We come into this world, do some thing, dress well, age and die. It is all mere words. I realise this and so resolutely pursue You. Show me a way to save myself.” At another place he goes on: “Life has no meaning. It is like a drop of dew on the tip of a blade of grass, which quickly fades before the rays of the sun. I should have thought of uniting my mind to your feet, long ago. But I had postponed this, saying I shall do this today, tomorrow and so on. Days have gone. Help me to redeem myself.....I do not know to give away my possessions. I am unable to shed my foibles and passions. The five senses are not under my control. They have had their full away over me. Old age is fast approaching. The senses are about to abandon me. I shall then be a burden on Thee. Such is the nature of this life and I am tired of it. I have now woke up and have now realised the Supreme Truth. Show me a way of redemption, my Lord!”

In several songs, Sundarar has sung in detail the nature of the services to be done to God and His Temple and also sung of the ritualistic worship which His devotees will be performing in the orthodox manner enjoined in the scriptures. Yet his mind always dwells on the name of the Lord. "Now I have given up all other ties here, my Lord, and am holding fast to Thy Feet alone in my heart. Now I am reborn, never to be born again. O Lord of Kodumudi whom the learned extoll! My lips will not cease to lisp Thy name, even when my mind fails to do so!"

He always remembers a vision of God he had at Sikali, the place of Saint Sambandhar and seeks refuge in that vision: "I am not aware of any refuge even in future births. I did suffer but have now got the gift of never forgetting Him. Kith and kin do not exist for me. I surrendered myself to Him. He bestowed on me a vision of His Effulgence at Kalumalam, gave me wisdom, and showed me the manner of reaching Him". "He is moved by the services of His servants. He showers His Grace on the devotees who sing His praises and dance in ecstasy. He fulfils the ambitions of those who unite their hearts to Him. He likes to dwell as a treasure in the hearts of pious people. He grants my prayers also".

The greatest contribution of Saint Sundarar is his *Tirut-Tondat-tohai*, where in eleven verses he lists the names of the servants of God. This had given rise to the great epic poem *Periya puranam* about four and a half centuries later, singing of the glories of the human soul in its service to God and godly men, in surrender and self-effacement and in service to a larger humanity. The like of these stories do not exist in any language in any period and that is the pride of the Saiva community, a testament of devotion, where stand the Saints of the ages, their hearts open to view, and lo! their hearts are the heart of the Eternal One".

To summarise, God elected Sundarar as his companion. But Sundarar realised that his role was always that of a servant in spirit, always trying to do His will, effacing self. The Lord and Master gives His devotee everything for the asking but man should not seek the pleasures of the earth which are illusory. He should always strive to reach Him through service to fellowmen, surrender and praise of His name.

1. SAINT TIRU NILAKANTHAR

I am the servant of Thiru Nilakanthar the potter.

Nilakanthar was a potter of Chidambaram, the most holy of all the sacred shrines of the Saivites. He and his wife, pious and religious people, were devoted to the worship of Siva in the local shrine.

Nilakanthar was in the habit of repeating the word *Nilakantham* (the blue throat), which is one of the names of Siva. Legends say that when the angels and the demons churned the ocean of milk for obtaining nectar, a deadly black poison arose out of it; Lord Siva swallowed it so that it might not destroy all life, and kept it in His throat, which became blue on account of the black poison. He was known thereafter as Lord Nilakanthar.

Now, our potter was practising his profession in the city. He made begging bowls of burnt clay and distributed them free to the Saiva religious mendicants who happened to pass through the city. This was the form of service which his devotion to God took. He was performing this service smoothly for quite a long time. One morning, his wife noticed him coming out of the house of a prostitute. Herself a model of chastity, she got immensely angry, and when her husband returned home and came near her, she cried: "In the name of the Lord Nilakantha, do not touch us". Nilakanthar stopped, as though stung.

(A popular version of the legend tells us that Nilakanthar had just stopped in the portico of the prostitute to escape drenching by the heavy rain which was then falling and, when the rains had stopped, came away and that he had nothing to do with the prostitute.)

The mention of the favourite sacred name Nilakantha stopped the husband and he replied: "My dear, you had sworn in the name of the Holy name Nilakantham. I shall not hereafter touch you. You said 'us'. So in future I shall never even think of *any* woman". True to his word, the

humble potter continued to live with his wife for many years in this manner, leading a virtuous life. He had given up the desire of the flesh and himself and his wife lived together but not as man and wife. This relationship was not known to the neighbours. Years rolled by and they had also passed their youth and had now become very old. Their celibate life had continued, along with their devotion to God. He was continuing his service of distributing the begging bowls.

Lord Siva, however, planned to cause such rare bhakti and adherence to a vow to be made known to the people at large. So, He assumed the form of a beggar and, smearing the sacred ash on His body, He came along the street, chanting the Lord's name with an alms bowl in his hand. Nilakanthar saw Him and, as usual took Him into his house with due respect and wished to entertain Him. He asked Him, "Holy Sir, of what service shall I be to you?" The begging devotee said, "Friend. We desire to go away now. But we shall leave this bowl with you and claim it at our leisure. Please remember this is a very rare bowl having the marvellous property of making every thing pure. This is to be treasured more than gems or gold". Saying this, the visitor gave him His bowl and went away. Nilakantha received the bowl and stored it in a safe place.

A long time passed. One day, the devotee suddenly appeared before Nilakanthar and claimed His bowl. But when Nilakanthar went into his store and looked for it, he could not find it anywhere in the house. It had disappeared! He returned to the holy man and reported: "Revered Sir, your bowl seems to have been lost. I could not find it anywhere. I do not know how it disappeared. I am very sorry for this. But I shall replace it by a new bowl. Kindly accept a new bowl instead". The holy man got wild. "No", he cried, "I want only my own bowl. Even if you substitute a golden bowl, I won't have it. You seem to have a deceitful intention. You have robbed me of my valuable property. I shall make your deceit public."

The innocent potter protested, saying that he was prepared to do anything to prove his innocence in the matter.

The holy man said: "We shall believe your innocence if you grasp the hand of your son and together take a dip in the temple tank". Nilakanthar said, he had no son. The other then said: "In that case, take the hand of your wife and let both of you have a dip in the temple tank". The potter, who had vowed not to touch his wife, could not do that. So he declined, saying that he had sworn not to touch his wife. The holy man took the matter to the Council of the temple priests, which ordered Nilakanthar to do the holy man's bidding.

Thereupon Nilakanthar went to the tank with his wife and protesting his innocence in the matter of the bowl, took a small bamboo stick, made his wife hold one end of it and himself holding the other end, plunged into the tank with her. But lo! when the two rose from the water together, they were no longer the old couple that went into the water, but they were transformed into a pair of young man and woman in the full bloom of youth. The whole city, which had assembled there to witness the judgement on the dispute between the holy man and the potter, was amazed at the change. The holy man disappeared and, in his place all the people had a vision of God Siva in the firmament. The greatness of Nilakanthar and his wife in overcoming the senses was made known to the people, who now realised that the beggling devotee was no other than God Siva Himself, who had appeared in order to make known the saintliness of Nilakanthar.

The story illustrates the reverence with which pious people held the Lord's name and how it restrained people from straying from the path of right conduct. The incident of this story is celebrated even today in the lives of the people of Chidambaram, the most important temple city in South India, and now also the seat of a University. To the west of the famous large temple of Lord Nataraja, there is a smaller temple called the temple of the "Lord who granted eternal youth", with a large tank in front, called also "the tank of the Lord who granted eternal youth". The incident is elaborately celebrated in the annual festivals in the temple.

Nilakanthar was a potter, member of one of the more humble castes. But by His devotion to the Lord's name had risen above caste and today, he is a canonised Saint whose image, along with the others, is worshipped by the high caste people also in all the temples of Tamil Nad. His name tops the list of Saints sung by Saint Sundarar by 700 A. D.

The story of this Tiru Nilakanthar has been sung as a musical opera by many composers of a later day.



2. IYAL-PAHAI NAYANAR

I am the serrant of Iyal-pahai who never said 'no'.

In the lives of the Saints as recorded by Sekkilar, we come across many acts which the modern age of reason would term abnormalities. We are not referring to miracles. In an age which believed in miracles, naturally they served a higher purpose in helping good people and in making known their goodness to the unbelieving world. But they are not to be called abnormalities. Men have reached the highest planes of noble conduct, of sacrifice, of self-effacement; they are possible and should not be confused with miracles.

But there are certain other lives of conduct which are against all established codes of human behaviour, both natural and conventional. When a man gives away his wife to another who asks for her and when she also agrees to go with him, when another cuts up his only child to satisfy the apparent craving for human flesh of a visiting sannyasi and when the child's mother agrees to the cutting up, we feel something is wrong and our mind revolts at such things. We term them abnormalities. These may be apparent abnormalities. Normalcy or otherwise depends on the plane of existence. All of us live on the average worldly plane of

eating, earning, going about our business and enjoying, and thinking of other things like God, godly men, devotion, sacrifice and the like, only occasionally. The best of us may not do unrighteous things, may not do anti-social acts and so on; their plane of existence is our own normal plane; only their activities are tempered by more of justice, more of *dharma* and more of truth than the general run. They do not live for example on the plane in which Gandhi lived. We have known that his plane of existence was Truth in thought, word and deed. But we do not live in such a plane nor do we aim to reach that plane, by conscious and constant practice.

Then again we should remember there is a higher plane than this; and that is absolute devotion to God and sacrifice of every thing to God. Men like Gandhi had glimpses of such a plane but it was not for the common people. The following incident may be of interest in this connection. When Gandhi enunciated his principles of basic education and wanted some one to take up that cause and give up everything else for it he fixed upon Aryanayakam who was then working with Tagore. Aryanayakam agreed but hesitated because of his wife Asha devi. "What if Asha devi does not join me in this work?" he asked. Without the least hesitation, Gandhi replied; "Persuade her. If she is not willing to join you, divorce her!"

Such words to come from Gandhi's lips! His followers would call this blasphemy. But it is the truth. Gandhi at that time was so much devoted to the cause of basic education that he considered no sacrifice too great for that cause. We would say that for a short period at least, Gandhi had risen to a higher plane and demanded and made great sacrifices which even his own ethical codes would not have normally approved.

All this explanation is necessary to understand some of the greatest sacrifices made by some Nayanmar and to understand their own conduct as against the approved ethical codes. The story of Iyal-pahai is an instance.

Iyal-pahai was born in a merchant community in the ancient city of Puhar (otherwise called Kaverippumpattinam, capital city of the Chola emperors upto the 2nd century A.C.) He never said 'no' to any Siva bhakta who came to him for anything and this was celebrated as his chief attribute in legend and lyric. Lord Siva once planned to disclose this noble trait of his to the world. So he took the form of a brahmin, besmeared with the sacred ash, but voluptuous in appearance, and went to Iyal-pahai. He saluted the visitor and enquired the purpose of his visit.

"We had heard of the fame of your giving and if we can have your promise that you will give us what we want, we shall mention it."

"If I happen to have what you ask, then it is certainly yours. Please mention it" said Iyal-pahai.

"I desire your wife."

Iyal-pahai felt glad that the visiting brahmin after all specified some object which he possessed. He went to his very beautiful wife and told her, "My dear, I have now given you to this great sage". She was confused for an instant, but the next minute she was sure of herself; "My Lord, I have no right but to do your bidding" she said, bowed to her husband and went and bowed before the visitor.

"Any thing else that I can do?" asked Iyal-pahai.

"Please go with me when I am taking her and help me to pass this place and your kin."

"I should myself have offered to do it. I am sorry I have waited for his request" thought Iyal-pahai and, arming himself with armour, sword and shield, followed the brahmin and his own wife.

The news spread. His relatives armed themselves with many weapons and surrounded the brahmin saying, "We shall not allow the brahmin to take away Iyal-pahai's wife."

although he had given her to him''. ‘‘You rogue, leave the lady here and then proceed’’ cried they. The brahmin looked at Iyal-pahai's wife as though he was afraid. She assured him saying that Iyal-pahai would drive them away. When they attacked him, Iyal-pahai cut them all to pieces with his sword and then accompanied the two until they crossed Puhar into the next village Tiru-Saykkadu. ‘‘You may now return’’, said the brahmin. Iyal-pahai again bowed before him and turned.

Siva was immensely pleased. ‘‘This bhakta, has returned without even casting a look at his wife!’’ exclaimed He. And then he cried, falsely. ‘‘O Iyal-pahai, help help, come here.’’ Iyal-pahai turned round and ran up but he saw not the false brahmin but saw instead on the high heavens the beautiful vision of Siva, with His consort Sakti, seated on their mount, the bull. He fell down and cried in sheer joy. Siva said, ‘‘Both of you follow me to Sivaloka’’. Accordingly they went there into everlasting bliss. The relations who died in the battle with Iyal-pahai also reached the heavens.

3. SAINT MAARA OF ILAYANGUDI

‘‘I am the servant of the servants of Maara of Ilayangudi’’

Feeding the poor religious mendicants had always been considered a meritorious act and an act of service to God Himself. A number of godly men had lived such a life of charity and public benefaction. Maara of the village of Ilayangudi near Karaikkal was one such. He was a farmer, who had an abundance of not only material wealth, but also the wealth of goodwill in his heart, which went out to help the poor and the hungry. He brought innumerable poor people to his house daily and treated them to a sumptuous feast.

Material wealth had a limit and in course of time Maara reached that limit. His possessions dwindled and he had not

much with which to feed the poor. In order to test him and to make known the largeness of his heart to the world, Siva Himself came to him for food one night at a very late hour. There was a heavy downpour of rain. Maara received the guest as usual, took him in, dried all the rain water from his body with dry towels and turned to his wife, to consider the question of giving him food. There was no food in the house and Maara and his wife were themselves without food that day. There was no money in the house and no borrowing was also possible. Feeding the hungry visitor was indeed a vexing problem then.

Women are resourceful and the lady of the house had a bright idea. "You had sown this morning some red paddy in the fields. That would be just now in the process of sprouting. Why can't you go and gather it? I can make a decent meal out of it" said she to her husband.

He jumped at the idea and rushed to the fields. It was pitch dark. He felt the way with his feet and reached the fields. Rain was pouring in torrents. That did not frighten him. He gathered the germinating seeds carefully with both hands, placed them in a basket and brought them home to his wife. The good lady took the basket and washed the mud from the grains.

But now, there was no fire wood for cooking. This presented no problem to Maara. He went to the backyard, removed the tiles out of a small area of the roof, cut off the rafters and other timber on the roof and brought them in small pieces to his wife. She started a fire, dried the grains, removed the husk by pounding and prepared several dishes. Some greens grown in the kitchen garden helped her to make a soup. Maara was very glad that with the ingenuity of his wife he was able to give a good meal to the guest.

He went and woke up the guest, who had apparently fallen into a short nap. But when he woke up, there was no trace of the guest, but a great illumination lit up the place.

Before the puzzled Maara and his wife, Lord Siva appeared In the heavens on the bull mount with His consort and said: "Friends, we are pleased at the remarkable spirit of service and sacrifice shown by you. Hereafter you shall lead an affluent life here and in the end you shall go to the heaven and there enjoy eternal happiness."

Very often we hear idle stories today, to the discredit of women folk in general, that they do not see eye to eye with their husbands and that they do not co-operate with them in acts of public service and munificence. Maara's wife gives the lie to such idle talk. She is a noble example of the ideal womanhood in the middle class families. She was resourceful enough to suggest a way out when her husband was in a fix and was quick to apply herself to the task of dehusking the wet paddy and preparing a round meal therefrom. With the poor material available, she had prepared several dishes! The selfless service of both, in the face of the direst adversity is a heart warming story, which will inspire and put fresh hope in the hearts of even the most forlorn and dejected people.

The reference to the red paddy in our ancient classics has a significance to the modern pleasure-loving world. People are fond of an easy life: they like things to be fashionable; white sugar is preferred to brown, and white polished rice is preferred to brown rough unpolished rice. But we find here the classical writers always praising only red rice as the one suitable for offering to God. Nowhere do we find white rice mentioned. It is always red paddy (sen-jaali) and red rice. This rice may not perhaps appear attractive but is highly nutritive. We find thus the stories of the Saints not only offering spiritual solace, but also containing hints for physical well being.

4. SAINT MEYPPORUL

"I am the servant of Meypporul, great in the art of Victory."

The unity of India is best seen in the chronicles of the lives of great men who lived in all ages and in all the regions of this vast country and followed its different religious faiths. The lives of such men have been one living manifestation of the Truth as each saw it. There is vast religious and devotional literature about such men of God in the Tamil language.

Such a man of God was Saint Meypporul (meaning, the Supreme Truth) whose anniversary is celebrated in November-December. He ruled over the small kingdom of Tirukkovalur now a taluk in South Arcot district of Tamilnadu. His date can now be fixed as earlier than the date of Sundarar, c. 700 A. D. He was a just ruler, a valiant warrior and a devout lover of God and a humble servant of the men of God. It is said that he ruled the land as a trust from Lord Siva.

Disciples of Satan have been many in all ages and, during Meypporul's time, Muttanathan was one such slave of Satan in the neighbouring state. He coveted Meypporul's state. But though he sustained a crushing defeat at the hands of Meypporul in several battles, his greed would not be crushed by defeat. What he could not achieve by valour, he determined to achieve by an act of perfidy. He knew that any one, who appeared externally in the garb of a Saivite devotee, would have easy access to the presence of Meypporul; his devotion to Siva's symbol of the Holy Ash was so widely known.

So, one fine evening, Muttanathan dressed himself like a follower of Siva with the sacred beads round his neck and his head, smearing holy ash liberally on his forehead and his body and carrying a dagger hidden, like a holy book in a satchel tucked under his left arm. The gatekeepers in the palace of Meypporul unhesitatingly allowed him to pass in;

their orders were not to stop any devotee of Siva. Meypporul was in his private chamber with his wife. When Muttanathan reached that place, the Security Officer, by name Datta, stationed outside, stopped him. "Please wait", he said, "the chief may be asleep. I shall ascertain his pleasure". But the determined rogue pushed him aside, saying "I am going to teach him divine knowledge" and went in.

As he went in, the chief was sleeping. His wife seeing the visitor woke up her husband and stood aside. Meypporul got up, folded his hands in obeisance and said, "Blessed am I by your visit. What is your command?" Muttanathan craftily said, "I have come here to teach you a rare *agama* scripture not extant anywhere".

"Twice blessed am I" said Meypporul, "please deign to teach it". The false teacher said, "your wife should go out and only we two should be here". On this suggestion, she immediately went out of the room. Then Meypporul seated him on a high pedestal and kneeled before him, like a true disciple, in a fitting manner. The artful guru made a pretence of unfolding the satchel and of opening a book there from, took out the dagger and stabbed the kneeling form of Meypporul.

Datta, the Security Officer at the entrance, who was always lending an ear to what was happening inside, sprang on Muttanathan in one bound with his drawn sword. But the falling chief halted Datta with an upraised arm saying, "Datta, our friend" Datta, feeling helpless at these words, cried, "woe into me that I am unable to help" and, supporting the falling chief, asked him "What is your will?" Meypporul gasped: "Take this friend and leave him unharmed outside our state".

But the incident was immediately known outside. The king's followers crowded round the palace thirsting for the blood of the murderer. But Datta stopped them with the words, "The king's will is that this sage should depart in peace" and, holding aloft his unsheathed sword, conducted the murderer to safety outside the state.

Meypporul's life was fast ebbing away but he held on with a superhuman effort of the spirit until Datta returned to say that Muttanathan had been led out of harm's reach. The king cast a look full of gratitude on Datta saying, "Great indeed is the good done to me by this gentleman". To his other followers and subjects, he gave a parting message: "Love the Lord through the love of His symbol, the Holy Ash". With these words, his spirit came to rest at the feet of the Lord.

Meypporul's devotion to Siva took the form of devotion to one particular symbol, the Holy Ash. Whenever he saw the symbol, there was complete surrender on his part. That the user of the symbol was his own sworn mortal enemy did not affect Meypporul's allegiance. Even at the point of his own death, he was anxious that his slayer should be saved.

Such is the simple story of this great soul, who as a valiant soldier had defeated his adversary in battle, but, as a man of God, practised *ahimsa* to the letter, by ensuring that his very murderer came to no grief, only because he wore the garb of a follower of Siva. Meypporul followed Truth as he saw it and smilingly gave up his life for it. No wonder his personal name was forgotten and he is remembered in the Book of Saints as "the Supreme Truth". His end has a parallel in Mahatma Gandhi's life and death in many ways.

5. SAINT VIRALMINDAR

*"I am the servant of Viralmindar of Sengunrur encircled
by large groves"*

The story of Abu Ben Adhem is well known among school children, through a short English poem taught in the class room. He was considered by the angel in the story as the first among the lovers of God because of his love for fellow beings. The lives of the saints in any religion or in any language is virtually the lives of

men who did service not only to God, but to fellow beings as well, in other words to men of God. The *Periya puranam* of Sekkilar extolls love and service to godly men. He took the cue for his history from a poem of Saint Sundarar, which in turn was caused by a remark of a worshipper of godly men, by name Viralmindar.

He was born in a velalar family in Sengunrur in the west, the Malainadu. He worshipped Siva, thereby to sever all worldly ties. He was always in the habit of worshipping Siva *bhaktas* before worshipping Siva. Once worshipping at the various shrines, he reached Tiru Arur. There he worshipped Siva and his bhaktas, and stayed there in the thousand-pillared hall. Saint Sundarar went there to worship. But he did not offer worship to the bhaktas assembled in the hall but just went in and prayed in the central shrine. Viralmindar felt not a little enraged. He declared before the assembly of the bhaktas, "We repudiate Sundarar who does not bow before God's servants and repudiate also his Lord, Siva".

But the attitude of Sundarar was different. He was thinking perhaps that he was unfit to worship the Siva bhaktas in the hall, saying to himself, "When is the day which would make me a servant of these"? When he worshipped the feet of Siva in the sanctum of the temple, the Lord taught him the essential greatness of the Siva bhaktas: "In their greatness they equal only themselves. Through their servitude, they have realized Us. By their single-minded devotion they could even overcome the world. They have no blemish. They are in the rare state of service and derive joy through their devotion. They are beyond the experiences of this birth and the next birth. Do then go to them."

Having thus instructed Sundarar in the greatness of the bhaktas, Lord Siva directed him to sing on them. Then he asked Him to instruct him in the manner of singing on them. The Lord thereupon gave him the first line, "I am the servant of the servants of the *Andanar* of Tillai" and bade

him continue. Sundarar continued the song and completed it in eleven verses. The song has since come to be known as *Tirut-Tondat-tohai*, the song on the servants of God. Thus the devotion of Viralmindar to godly men had been responsible in bringing out the song on such men and indirectly in causing the *Periyapuranam* also to be written at a later date. In due time, Viralmindar was raised to the state of head of Siva's forces.

6. SAINT AMARNITI

"I am the servant of Amarniti, who wore a fine wreath of jasmine with soft petals."

Many men of God have been made to go through the ordeal of a test in order to judge their steadfastness in the cause they have espoused. In the end they all have come out victorious, their faith in God stronger and brighter. We should remember that the age of all the saints was a long time earlier than the Eighth century. Superhuman agencies played a part in their lives and they helped to test the chosen and uplift those that had passed through the test with all truth, humility and faith. Even in this age of reason, we shall do well to accept the stories as they are, since they seek only to emphasize an aspect of some eternal truth. Nothing is gained by trying to question the veracity of each myth or miracle. In attempting to satisfy reason, we shall be missing the reality and the great inherent message.

Amarniti was born of a merchant community in Palaiyarai, famous as one time capital of the Chola monarchs. He used to feed men of God during the annual festival at Tiru Nallur, an important shrine in the neighbourhood, and supply them with a loin cloth. In those days, the clothing needs of the people were very few. Ascetics and mendicants covered themselves with just a loin cloth and

nothing more. The tropical climate of Tamilnad did not require more clothing than a loin cloth even in the winter or rainy season. Hence supplying a loin cloth for a devotee meant in effect giving him clothing for the year and this was considered a very meritorious act. Amarniti had built a large resting hall for the men of God at Tiru Nallur and visitors used to stay there as his guests.

Lord Siva one day appeared before him in the garb of a young ascetic, in order to make known to the world his unwavering purpose and devotion. Amarniti met him and asked him with due respect what service he might render him and prayed that he might be his guest for the day. The guest agreed saying. "My friend, we heard that you are feeding God's men and giving them cloth. We shall stop in your place for food. We shall now go to the Kaveri for a bath. We have a spare loin cloth with us. It is extremely valuable. May we leave it with you for safe custody?"

Amarniti agreed to keep the cloth, received it, placed it in a safe place inside his house and attended to his other duties. Rain was pouring. The guest returned after his bath. His scanty clothing was completely drenched. "Food is ready," said the host. "Will you kindly bring the cloth we had left with you? I am thoroughly wet, as you perceive," replied the guest.

Amarniti went into the house to fetch the cloth but it had mysteriously vanished. He searched every place and corner in his house but could not find it. "Holy sir, the cloth has completely disappeared. I do not know how. But I have brought you another, a good cloth, newly woven. I pray you kindly use the substitute."

But the guest immediately flew into a rage. "Is this the way you serve God's men? As we indicated to you, our cloth was a very valuable one. It has no equal. How can we take any substitute?" However, after great persuasion, he ultimately agreed to accept a cloth of equal weight.

Accordingly, a pair of scales was brought, and on it the guest placed the extra cloth which he always carried on his

mendicant's staff. The cloth was placed on one pan of the scales and on the other, Amarniti placed another similar cloth. But this scale immediately rose up. Nothing daunted, he placed on it all his clothes one by one, cotton, silk and the rest but to no effect. The scales would not be even. Then he offered to place all his gold and gems on the scale. The guest agreed. Thereupon he brought all his gold jewels and trinkets, and other valuables and placed them on the scale one after another, but to every one's astonishment, the scale with the visitor's cloth sank down while the other with the gold and other valuables rose higher and higher. Amarniti placed every thing he possessed but that could not tilt the scales.

He then spoke to the holy man: "Sir, all my wealth has been exhausted. Only my family remains. If it is your will, my wife and son and myself will mount the scales". The guest agreed.

Amarniti was glad that somehow he could make amends for having lost the valuable cloth of the visitor. In orthodox fashion, he came round the scale in which the guest's cloth was placed, saying, "Let the scales now at least stand even, if our faith in Lord Siva and His symbol, the sacred ash, has been true and unwavering", and ascended the scale with his wife and son, praying to the Lord of Tiru Nallur and chanting His name. Now, the devotion and piety of Amarniti was equal to the cloth, which was the Lord's. The scale which rose high came down and was even with the other containing the loin cloth, which had now risen up. Those assembled were all naturally wonder-struck.

The scales rose further and ascended to the very heavens, carrying the precious load of Amarniti and his family, into Sivaloka.

Amarniti comes in the long line of saints who considered the performance of some service to God or godly men the highest ideal, meriting ultimately the sacrifice of oneself and one's family.

7. SAINT ERIPATTAR

"I am the servant of Eripattar of the broad-leaved spear."

Eripattar (bhaktar) lived in the city of Karur, a former Chola capital. There is a large temple in the city. He used to worship there. He always carried an axe with him and smote down mercilessly any one who harmed the men of God.

Sivakami-andar was a *bhakta* who also lived in that city. He did floral service to the shrine. He used to gather flowers, carry them to the temple and weave floral wreaths for God. One day he was carrying flowers as usual in a flower basket hanging from a staff placed on his shoulder and going to the temple. King Puhai Chola was the ruling monarch. His royal elephant was being led back from the river where it had gone for its bath. As it neared the spot where Sivakami-andar was going with his flower basket, it saw the flowers. It ran after Sivakami-andar, plucked the flower basket and threw the flowers on the ground. The mahouts who saw this, drove it fast, away from the place.

Sivakami-andar, horrified that such a thing had happened, ran after the elephant, to beat it with his staff. Poor man, could he run with an elephant and could he beat it up? It went away fast and the old man was not able to approach it. In extreme grief he fell down, smote the ground with his hands and cried:

"My Lord of Karur, who skinned the elephant which came to attack Him! Who is the only refuge for humble people! How dare this elephant pluck and destroy the flowers intended for You?"

Eripattar happened to pass that way. He heard the cry of Sivakami-andar. He came to him and learnt what had happened. With the fierce axe in his hand, "Where is the elephant?" he asked.

"It went along this road."

Eripattar flew like the wind in pursuit and saw it. He jumped on it and severed its offending trunk from its body. It fell down like a huge mountain and died. Then he attacked and slew the elephant's mahouts and its attendants who were five, for their negligence in allowing it to do this mischief.

The king came to know of it and hastened to the place. When Eripattar was pointed out to him as the person who slew the elephant, he would not believe it. "This is a Siva bhakta. He would not have slain the elephant unless it had done some harm. It is my good fortune that nothing happened to him when he went in front of the animal." So saying he approached Eripattar, saluted him and said, "I do not know what happened. I was told something. But is the slaying of the elephant and its attendants enough for the offence committed by it?"

Thereupon Eripattar told him what had happened. Then the king said: "The killing of these is not enough for the offence committed by the elephant to the bhakta. I should also be killed. But it is not proper to strike me with your good axe. Here is my sword, cut me down with it" and offered his own sword. Eripattar saw his earnestness and thought, "Unless I accept the sword from him, he may kill himself; he appears to be such a great bhakta"; and so took the sword.

The king thought that Eripattar was about to kill him with it. But what did he see? "Have I not caused great harm to this bhakta? He has offered to have himself killed to expiate the harm done. How can I harm this bhakta? It is but proper I take my life!" decided Eripattar and applied the sword to his own neck. The king was shocked. At once he jumped up and seized Eripattar's hand and the sword. Eripattar was feeling miserable that he could not kill himself.

At that moment, a voice was heard in the heavens: "My friends, all these incidents were worked by Us to show to the world your love for God". The elephant and its

attendants came back to life. The flower basket was filled with flowers and Sivakami-andar felt happy. Eripattar removed the sword from his neck and bowed to the Chola king who in turn fell at his feet.

At the request of Eripattar, the Chola king mounted the elephant and rode back to the palace. The bhakta went to the temple with his flowers. Eripattar continued in his service to God and in due time reached Kailas as the head of Siva's forces.

The Chola king of this story was known as Puhai Chola. He is also reckoned as one of the saints and his further story is narrated by Sekkilar later. (Chapter 39.)

8. SAINT ENADI-NATHAR

'I am the servant of the servants of Enadi-nathar.'

In ancient days, fighting was a profession and soldiers and generals of the army under the local rulers were recruited from the members of that profession. There were regular schools of soldiery, where capable warriors trained aspiring youths in the arts of sword craft and warfare.

One such school was conducted by Enadi-nathar (commander-in-chief). Many pupils were in training under him and they paid him reasonable tuition fees. Enadi-nathar was a deeply religious man. He loved God Siva and was very much attached to Siva's symbol of the Sacred Ash. He utilised all his earnings for serving Siva's followers and the devotees of the sacred ash.

There was another soldier in the same place by name Atisura (very valiant) who was also running a similar school. He was a very vain fellow, always jealous of the repute of Enadi whose school was quite a flourishing, popular concern, while his own school was failing and his fees were dwindling. One day he decided to fight it out with Enadi. So he went to his house with his men and challenged him to battle.

The adherents of the two leaders met in battle on an open ground nearby. Enadi, by his personal valour routed out Atisura and his forces. Atisura ran home from the battle field, thoroughly beaten. But his jealousy was not beaten, and so he began to scheme. He knew of Enadi's devotion to the sacred ash and decided to get the better of him by exploiting this trait. The next morning he sent word to Enadi that he was prepared to meet him in single combat.

Not knowing Atisura's scheme, Enadi agreed and met him in combat. The wily rogue had covered his forehead profusely with the Sacred Ash and concealing it behind his shield, approached Enadi. There was a deadly duel and, as was expected, Enadi was getting the better of the other. His sword was lifted high in a final deadly sweep. Atisura saw this and craftily lowered his shield at that moment, uncovering his ashsmearred face to the advancing fighter.

Enadi saw the face, saw the ash and a terrible convulsion shook him. "What a sinner am I! I am fighting with a devotee of Siva! I shall no longer offer fight. I shall submit myself to the will of this devotee." Thinking in this manner within a fraction of a second, Enadi offered no more fight or resistance and was about to drop his sword and shield, when another thought struck him.

Atisura now appeared to Enadi as a religious man. So, it was the duty of Enadi to see that no fault attached to him on Enadi's account. He thought: "If I drop my sword, this religious man will no doubt kill me, but the sin of attacking an unarmed man will be on him. I shall not allow this to happen. I shall be armed, but shall not offer fight". So thinking, Enadi was just holding his sword and shield when his foe struck him down dead. Because of this noble thought and of his devotion to Lord Siva and His symbol, which ended in his own death, Enadi's soul came to Eternal peace at the Feet of Lord Siva.

The prophet of Nazareth enjoined men to show the foe the right cheek also if they were smitten on the left. Here we

find Enadi doing something even more subtle: he was anxious that the smiter should not be guilty of violating the laws of fighting: he practised non-violence not only in deed, but even in thought.

9. SAINT KANNAPPAR

"I am the servant of the great Kannappar who is the fountain of all arts."

Ritualistic religion had always looked down upon simple devotion and could not understand selfless surrender to God. Simple folks never bothered themselves with any deep knowledge of the scriptures and this evoked derision from pedants versed in the scriptures. But the lives of our saints always hold out before us the simple truth that surrender and selflessness far surpass ritualism. The story of Saint Kannappar well illustrates this great truth.

A long long time ago, a chief by name Naga, ruled over a tribe of hunters who lived close to a forest near Kalahasti in modern Chittoor district, now part of Andhra Pradesh. After a long period of prayers to God, a sturdy little boy was born to him and was named Tinna (meaning robust). The boy grew up into a fearless archer, skilled in all the modes of fighting and warfare and in the use of the weapons of those days. As was the custom among those people Tinna was sent when he was sixteen on his maiden hunt, to qualify himself for the rulership of his tribe.

Along with two of his chosen comrades, Nana and Kada, Tinna entered the forest and, after bagging several animals, pursued a huge wild boar which led him to the foot of a hill. He shot and killed the boar. His comrades were amazed at his prowess in killing that mighty boar in his maiden hunt. When they suggested that they roast it and eat it, he said he felt very thirsry. His comrades pointed out to him a small river close to the hill. Beckoning to Nana to follow him, he

mounted the hill. With every step he felt lighter and lighter and some nameless wonder and joy filled his heart. At the top of the hill he saw a *Sivalinga* (image), An ineffable joy welled up in his heart. Tinna knew that this was the image of God, worshipped there. He rushed to it, embraced it and shed tears of joy. A sudden and mysterious transformation had come upon him. "My Lord," he cried, "how can You be here alone amidst wild beasts?" Looking round, he saw that the image was bathed in water and fresh flowers had been strewn on Him. His aide, Nana, told him that a brahmin priest used to go there every day, bathe the image, strew flowers on it and also give it food. Hearing this Tinna thought that he should also do likewise as these were apparently acts pleasing to God. But he did not relish the thought of leaving the Lord alone and go in search of food. He would take a few steps; return, embrace the Lord, would again go, cast a loving look, like a cow which had just yielded a calf. However, very reluctantly he finally left the place and went out to get water, flowers and food.

On the way, his other aide, Kada, tried to intercept him offering him cooked meat from their hunt, but Tinna had no eyes or ears for anyone except his Lord. After sometime, the two men left Tinna to report his behaviour to his father. His father in due course came there but no one was able to move Tinna from his self-appointed post of guard for the Lord and so they all returned to their homes disappointed.

At day break, Tinna left off his vigil to get water and food for the Lord. Having no vessel to carry water in, he took a mouthful of water in his mouth, inserted a few bunches of wild flowers for the Lord in his hair and carried some cooked and pre-tasted meat in one hand, the other hand being occupied with bow and arrows, ever on the alert to fight wild animals that might attack the Lord.

Returning to the temple by evening, he swept off the flowers on the Lord's head with his sandalled foot because both of his hands were engaged in carrying food and weapons, spat the water from his mouth on the image by way of a bath for Him, and presented the meat he had brought for His food,

"My Lord", said he, "I have tasted this meat and found it very sweet. Please take it".

The night was over and it was now day break. Tinna went out again and followed the same routine. Meanwhile, the Brahmin priest who was offering ritualistic worship to the Lord, came there for his morning worship and adoration all round. He saw impressions of shoes, spittle and meat. His heart revolted at the sight. After cleaning the place, he offered his usual ceremonial worship and went home. After he went, Tinna returned with water, flowers and meat as usual and worshipped the Lord in his own way. He stood guard over him all night holding the bow and arrows in his hands, without a wink of sleep. In the morning he went out to gather his materials, while the priest Sivagochariyar came in and performed his agamic puja.

This double puja went on for five days. The priest could endure it no longer. He cried to the Lord "My lord how is it that such wanton desecration has been done here?" He heard the Lord in his dream say: "My friend, the desecrator is our bhakta. All his form is love to Us. All his consciousness is the eagerness to know Us. All his action is pleasing to Us. His sandalled foot is dearer to Us than the feet of our child Muruha. His spittle is holier to Us than all the Ganga waters. All the flowers showered on us by the devas and others will not equal the flowers given to Us from his hair. The meat tasted by him is sweeter to Us than all the offerings made into the sacrificial fire. His unsophisticated words are superior than all the scriptural mantras. Do not worry, conceal yourself here tomorrow and see for yourself the measure of his love to Us."

Much wonder-struck, the priest chose to wait in the temple and see what happened. So, when his usual worship for the day was over, he concealed himself there and was anxiously waiting for any event that might happen. He of course knew nothing about Tinna.

Tinna, who had gone away during the day, came at night fall as usual with water, flowers and meat. On his

way he had some evil omens and so he ran up to the Sivalinga with greater haste. Going up to the image, he saw blood oozing out of the right eye of the Lord. He was greatly shocked. Thinking that this might be the work of some miscreant or wild animal, he searched around but found none. He then brought some herbs to stop the blood flow, but they had no effect. Suddenly, he recalled a popular saying "eye for an eye" meaning that a damaged eye could be replaced by a healthy eye. Immediately he dug out his right eye with an arrow and applied it to the right eye of the Lord. The flow of blood stopped, Tinna danced in ecstasy.

But not for long. The left eye however began to bleed now. Tinna saw this. "No fear" said he, "Now I know the remedy". Determined to apply his left eye to the image. Tinna drew out an arrow, kept his sandalled foot close to the affected eye of the image to mark the spot, since he would not be able to see the place after his second eye had been pulled out, and inserted the arrow. Unable to stand such sacrifice any longer, a hand shot out of the image saying "Stop, Kannappa, stop" (Kannappa, one who applied the eye).

Devotion such as this had never been seen before. The learned priest Sivagochari was awe-struck and he could not but fall at the feet of the unlettered hunter, who was thenceforth known as Kannappar.

Such is the legend of Kannappar. His praise is sung by all the hymn singers and also by Sankara. There is always a never ending conflict between the two aspects of devotion. But the truth is that 'primitive' people can be more spontaneous in the expression of love than the 'civilized' people. The second is that the heart is more dear to God than the head. Rituals by their very nature can be only for the chosen few, those who can follow the path of cold reason. But what matters is really the heart. This most ancient legend records for all time the triumph of the heart over the head, love over reason.

The words of Saint Sundarar, said when mentioning Kannappar – the fountain of all arts – is most significant.

10. SAINT KUMKULIYAK-KALAYAR

“I am the servant of the servants of Kalayar of Kadavur.”

The story of Kalayar is a wonderful idyll in the annals of the stories of the Saints remarkable for Kalaya's humility and self-sacrifice. He belonged to Tirukkadavur in Tanjavur district, where a legendary young boy Saint in Hindu mythology, by name Markkandeya, overcame the fear of Death by worshipping the Lord. His story is that he was destined to live only for a period of sixteen years. But in the firm belief that he could overcome the clutches of Yama the God of Death by worship of Siva the boy did the worship daily with full devotion. When actually Yama came there to snatch the soul of the boy on the appropriate day, the boy embraced the Linga out of fear and the Lord kicked Yama to death. This is a very popular legend in the entire district.

Kalayar had dedicated himself to one form of service to God, viz., the burning of incense in His presence in the local shrine. This service he continued to perform at his own cost, even when he was reduced to the direst poverty thereby. He sold away all his movable property, and landed property also for this purpose.

One day, his wife and children had nothing to eat and he had no money. His wife, a remarkably devout woman, who always supported him in his service to the Lord, called him and handed over to him her *taali* for being sold in the market to procure foodstuffs for the starving children.

Now, among the Tamils, the *taali* (*Tiru mangalya*, the giver of all prosperity) is a very sacred symbol: in the form of a small trinket, the bridegroom ties it round the neck of the bride at the time of the wedding. It is a symbol of married state in a woman and she removed it only when her husband died. She would rather die than remove it from her neck. The handing over of the *taali* by Kalayar's wife is an incident in the direst extremity, unique and unheard of among the stories of the land.

Kalayar received the *taali* and went to the market ostensibly to exchange it for rice. He saw a vendor on the way, selling bags of incense. With no thought of food or wife or children Kalayar gave away the *taali* for incense, went to the temple and was burning it happily in the shrine.

By the Grace of God, such selfless sacrifice did not go unrewarded. His house meanwhile was filled with not only tons and tons of rice and other provisions, but also gold and other valuables. To Kalayar who was in the temple, a voice from the heavens said: "You are very hungry. Go home and have some food".

Kalayar went home but the house itself had so changed that he could hardly recognise it. He asked his wife: "How did these things come here?" "By the Grace of God" she replied. He was very much wonder-struck at what had happened, said his humble prayers to God, and continued his usual service to the temple in a selfless and humble way.

Sometime later, news came that every thing was not all right in the temple at Tiru-Panandal, 30 miles from Kalayar's place. A miracle had happened in that temple some time back, for the sake of a lady worshipper.

Taadagai was a woman devotee worshipping the Lord Siva in the temple there. She was weaving flower garlands daily and placing them on the Lord's image. She was such a pious and selfless lady that God planned to cause her intense devotion to be known to the outside world. It so happened one day that, as she was approaching the image of the Lord in the temple holding the garland with both of her hands, her dress got loose and she felt it slip from her waist. Now, when any one is doing any service to God, such as bringing water, weaving a garland etc., one is not permitted to pollute one's hands by touching anything, other than those offered for worship. So, as she was holding the flower garland with both of her hands, she could not release them for adjusting her dress. Therefore she just pressed the slipping dress to her body by the two elbows, at the same time holding

on to the garland with the two hands. In this position she was unable to move. As she was experiencing great anxiety and mental agony that she was not physically able to move and place the garland on the image herself, the Lord sympathised with her in her plight. The image miraculously inclined itself and bent its head towards her. With great joy, she placed her wreath around the image, said her prayers and went home with inexpressible joy. The image, however, continued to remain in the inclined posture. No one knew of this occurrence.

When the temple priests saw this the next morning, they tried to put back the image to its original vertical position but could not do so. Not knowing how this had happened and fearing that some vandal might have tampered with the image they reported the matter to the king. He came and saw the inclined image. Desiring to put it straight, he opened the wall of the *sanctum* on the opposite side and employed a large number of his men to pull the image from the other side in order to make it straight. But it would not move. He employed his armies and elephants but even they were powerless. He was naturally very much perturbed over this.

This news reached Kalayar at Kadavur and he promptly repaired to Tiruppanandal. He saw what had happened and how the king, all his armies and elephants, had fallen down exhausted through pulling at the image. "Let me also share in this task and exhaustion" thought he, and tying the rope round his neck, pulled at the image, uttering His name. Wonder of wonders! The image moved and came to the normal vertical position. The Lord resisted the pull of power, but was powerless before the delicate pull of love !

This incident demonstrated to the king and the people not only the devotion of Kalayar, but the devotion of the obscure woman Taadagai as well. Kalayar stayed there for a short while and then came back to his own place, Tirukkadavur, where he continued his services. In course of time, he had the rare opportunity of welcoming Saint Appar and Saint Sambandhar to the place and giving them a feast in his house.

Kalayar thereafter lived the full span of his life and in course of time attained eternal bliss at the Feet of the Lord.

Such is the story of the brahmin Saint Kalaya, in whose life two miraculous incidents occurred, bringing out the devotion and service of a woman also. The wife of Kalayar was herself a noble character, completely identifying herself with her husband in his self-imposed service to God and bearing all privations, not only in her life, but in her children's life as well. She might have easily parted with all her jewels and trinkets but to part with her *taali* is something unheard of and unthinkable to the Hindu mind. It was perhaps rich spiritual traditions such as these which helped to induce our young women and old to give away their jewels without the least hesitation to Mahatma Gandhi when he was collecting gifts for the Harijan fund. A godly intoxication had led Kalayar and his wife to spiritual heights, they would not normally attain. Gandhi roused this intoxication and utilised it for national purposes. It is well for us to remember the lives of this simple couple.

In memory of the lady Taadagai, the temple is named after her and is even today known as Taadagesvaram.

11. SAINT MANAKKANJARAR

“I am the servant of the great giver Manakkanjarar with hill-like shoulders.”

Inscrutable are the ways in which God tests the devotion of his servants. Sometimes they are very odd and it is to the glory of godly men that they come out of all ordeals in flying colours.

Kanjarur is a village in the Kaveri delta (identified as Ananda-tandava puram) near Mayuram where a Siva bhakta by name Manakkanjarar was born. He came of the velalar community and was also commander under the ruling prince. He considered Siva bhaktas as Siva Himself, and in a

modern Gandhian concept, he might be said to have held his property in trust for Siva bhaktas. He had no child for a long time and then by God's grace he had a daughter. She grew up into a beautiful damsel. Negotiations for her marriage were under way. The bridegroom was Eyarkon Kalikkamar of Perumangalam, who is also reckoned as a saint on account of several incidents in his life. He had started with his party to reach Kanjarur, a distance of about eight miles, for the wedding ceremony.

Before he reached the bride's place some thing unique happened there. Siva appeared before Manakkanjarar in the guise of a Saiva ascetic; of course no one knew he was Siva. Kanjarar welcomed him and informed him that his daughter's marriage was about to take place. "My blessings on the bride" said the visitor. The bride also came and prostrated before the ascetic. He observed the dense long tresses of hair on her head, and said to Kanjarar, "The fine hair of your daughter can be made into a sacred thread to adorn our". Without the least hesitation, Kanjarar drew out his sword, cut off the tresses of his daughter person's hair and presented them to the ascetic, but lo! there was no ascetic to receive them. Instead Siva with his consort appeared in the heavens: "My friend, We tested you in order to show to the world your great devotion to Us. You may reach Our place in due time".

While Kanjarar stood there lost in wonder and amazement at the vision of the Lord, the bridegroom, Kalikkamar arrived. He came to know of all that had happened there. Without the least regret he married her and returned to his place. By the grace of Siva, the tresses of hair quickly grew on the bride's head.

12. SAINT ARIVAL TAAYAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Tayar with the unfailing sickle."

Stories abound in every land about religious men who take a vow that they perform a particular pious act regularly and, when anything happens to hinder the fulfilment of that vow, even give up their lives. The simple story of Taayar is one such.

Taayar was born in a small village in the Kaveri delta. He made it a habit to present red rice, red greens and tender mangoes to the local temple daily for being offered to the Lord there. He was doing this act of piety for a long time. However owing to adverse circumstances, all his wealth dwindled and he reached the stage of extreme poverty. He took this as a test for his devotion and never wavered in his self-appointed duty of rendering the offerings to the temple.

He had now no land and no money and he went out to the fields and worked as a hired labourer. Wages were paid in kind. Whatever coarse paddy he received, he used for his own food but all the superior red paddy he used for the temple offering. A further test awaited him. All the paddy he received was now only red paddy. He never hesitated for a moment. He diverted all that paddy to the temple and sought other means for his own food. His noble and resourceful wife gathered a number of wild greens from the garden and prepared some dishes therefrom. Taayar was subsisting only on these. In a short time, the monsoon failed and even the wild greens were not available. Taayar now lived only on water but continued his service. But he had grown very weak and emaciated.

In this state, he was one day going to the temple carrying on his head as usual red rice, red greens and tender mangoes in a basket, with his wife following him. Being starved for food, a dizziness came over him and he fell down on a muddy place. His wife saw him fall and supported him but the basket fell down from his head and its contents spilled on the wet mud.

When he recovered, Taayar realised what had happened. "What is the use of my going to the temple now? All my offerings have fallen into the mud. When I am unable to present these offerings to God, why should I live?" So saying, he drew out his sickle and began to cut off his head.

The ever-merciful God in Heaven saw this. Such devotion had not been heard of. A hand shot out of the mud and grasped Taayar's arm stretched out to sever his head and arrested it in mid air: simultaneously the sound of biting the tender mango also arose out of the mud. From the sound he realised that God had accepted his offerings, although spilled in the mud. He stopped cutting his head. A voice said: "Friend, We are pleased with your devotion. May you live long, healthy and happy and finally enter the heavens".

Taayar was thenceforth known as 'Arival Taayar' (arival-sickle) in recognition of his attempt to cut off his head with his sickle.

II

The simple story of Taayar has many lessons for the present day. To him presentation of the offerings to God was an ideal and he was prepared to lay down his life for it. Such people, though rare, do exist in every period of human history and they are the pride of mankind.

In later day Hindu society, greater importance was attached to renunciation, and an ascetic was always held in great esteem. This was so because, the ascetic or *sannyasi* had severed all bonds of family and kinship and was considered to be prepared for any kind of sacrifice, either for his own spiritual advancement or for the welfare of society. Some of the Saiva Saints had risen to great heights of sacrifice, though they had not cut themselves away from the bonds of family. Taayar was a householder, living with his wife and we find that she also had taken a keen interest in her husband's devotional activities. She was able to see eye to eye with him and was actually sustaining him in

the most adverse circumstances. Only with her cooperation was he able to live up to his own ideals. The women whom we meet in the lives of the Saints have all been models of womanhood, ideal women who were a source of strength and cheer to their husbands, and real partners in life.

There is a craze at the present time for white paddy and highly polished white rice, so devoid of all nutritional value. The poet here mentions red paddy (red rice) and red greens. We find thus that the religious stories contain hints on ways to healthy living too. (Vide also the story of Saint Ilayankudi Marar.)

13. SAINT ANAYA NAYANAR

*"I am the servant of Anayan of the place Mangalam,
rich with wave-lashing waters."*

The Tamil language is considered to have been of three divisions even for more than two and a half millennia. They are iyal-poetry, isai-music and natakam-drama (dance). Characteristically we have here a devotee who literally sang his way into Kailas through his music, dedicated to Siva.

Anaayar was a musician who realised the final Bliss through the dedication of his music to Lord Siva. He was born of the cowherd's community in Mangalam, a village near Tirucirappalli. He owed allegiance to no other deity than Lord Siva. Allowing the cattle to graze peacefully on a selected good pasture, he used to play the name of the Lord the *Panchakshara* on his flute. He had made the flute in bamboo according to technical specifications in the sastras. All animal beings were moved by his melody and they listened spell-bound.

One day, while leading his cows, he saw a cassia tree fully enveloped in its own rich yellow blossoms. This

reminded him of Lord Siva wearing his favourite Cassia flowers. Immediately he began to pour forth delicious music from his flute. It was as though honey from the celestial tree, mixed with nectar, was being poured into the ears.

Cows forgot to chew the grass they had eaten, The calves which applied their mouths to the udders of their mothers forgot to suck milk therefrom. Bulls and deer with upturned ears came to listen to the music. Peacocks and other birds flocked to him lost in the music. Cowherds forgot their work. Serpents came to him from their holes celestial nymphs from the heavens, others flying in the celestial regions came to him on their vehicles. The very winds stopped blowing. The flower laden branches in the trees did not move. Even the streams and rivulets stopped their flow. Clouds ceased their movement and did not drop their showers. Thunders did not sound and the seven seas ceased their ebb and flow.

Thus the sweet music from his flute filled the whole earth and the heavens and wafted to the ears of the Lord dancing in the Golden Hall. The Lord, the cause of all music, appeared with His Consort before Anayar and took him in the same singing state to His very Presence in His Cosmic Dance.

The story of Anayar is unique. There have been singers among the Saints. We know Karaikkal Ammai, Appar, Sambandhar and Sundarar sang their songs. We know also that Tiru Nilakkantha yalppanar accompanied on his *yazh* the songs of Saint Sambandhar. These were all singers of songs. But Anayar is different. He did not sing any song but only the *Panchakshara*, the five syllables so very special to Siva, on his flute. Here we see the effect of sound, not of word and their meaning, wafting through the air. The sound was that of Siva's mantra which music held the entire universe - all life, human, celestial, bird and animal-spell bound. That is the glory of Anayar's service. What is it? Is it possible to categorize it? Is it *charya* or *kriya*, *yoga* or *jnana*? It is all these moulded into one yet transcending them.

One Krishnan Nayar used to go Tiruvidaimarudur once a year for an elaborate and expensive type of worship for the Lord Mahalingam there. His party consisted of a score of people men and women, coming from Kerala, in different walks of life. They never sang any Tamil song in the Presence but chanted only the *Panchakshara* "OM Namasivaya-Sivaya Nama OM". They chanted this mantra in such a full throated and frenzied form that all the assembled people also caught the spirit and sang the mantra and danced in ecstasy. Even the pipers, the *nagasvaram* players, caught the melody, played only this mantra on their instrument. So this became an annual feature where the chanting of this mantra became a universal craze. Such was its infective quality when sung with deep devotion.

If one had seen the chanting of the Krishnan Nayar group and the resultant *nagasvaram* playing, one may be better able to appreciate Sekkilar's portrayal of Anayar's chanting of the mantra on his flute.

14. MURTI NAYANAR

"I am the servant of Murti who ruled the world with the three emblems (the sacred ash, rudraksha beads and the five syllabled mantra)."

Murti was born in a merchant community in the city of Madurai. He was a devout follower of Siva and his heart over-flowed with joy of the Lord. He took it as his duty in life to grind and supply sandal for the decoration of Chokkalinga murti (Saiva) enshrined in the Madurai temple. It so happened that during his period, an alien chief from Karnataka raided the Pandiya kingdom, drove away the Pandiyan king and became the ruler at Madurai. He belonged to the Jain religion and great was his harassment of the devotees of Siva who wore the sacred ash. He caused considerable trouble to Murti. He prevented sandal wood from

reaching Murthi for grinding the paste for Siva. One day Murthi could not get any piece anywhere. "will not this tyrant perish! When is the country to see a beneficial Saiva ruler?" he cried in anguish.

Then he consoled himself. "I shall now use my arm as a piece of sandal wood" decided he and began to grind it as he would grind a piece of wood. Blood spurted out. The skin and flesh were off and the bones also were off. Siva could stand it no longer, "My friend, worry no more. This kingdom shall be yours. You may undo the harm done by the tyrant" spoke a voice from the heavens. Murthi was glad. Lo! the worn out hand grew normal. The alien king died that night. As he had no heir, the officers of the place adopted the normal procedure for getting a king. They decked the king's elephant, closed its eyes and sent it along the streets to choose a ruler. It went straight to Murti, bowed before him, and lifting him upon its back, brought him to the palace. He was placed on the throne.

"I shall agree to be your king if the Saiva religion is followed by all of you and if Jainism is given up" he said, The ministers and the people agreed. Then the sacred ash was the *abhisheka* ointment for his coronation; the *rudraksha* beads were the royal jewels; and the matted locks were the king's crown. Coronation took place in this manner. Murti assumed the reins of government as a servant of God. He remained a bachelor wearing the three insignia of Siva and when his end came, his ~~soul~~ came to rest at the feet of God.

When we look at this story from a historical perspective, we may see that the aliens were the Kalabhras who had seized power and occupied Madurai between 250 and 575 A. D.

15. SAINT MURUHA NAYANAR

"I am the servant of Muruha."

The four paths in Saivism leading to ultimate release from bonds and to final oneness with Siva are apparently graded from the simple to the most difficult. For example the *Yoga marga* by its very nature cannot be for all. Even the *kriya marga* is very difficult and involves a large amount of discipline in thought, word and deed. *Charya* for that matter seems to be the simplest. For the lay people and the non-initiated this course seems to be very easy of adoption and at the same time to be fully satisfying also.

Muruha was born in Tiru-Puhalur in the Chola country, in a Sivacharya family. He was a true devotee of Siva. Every morning he used to go to the temple flower garden even before day break after finishing his bath and other personal duties, gather the four kinds of flowers separately into different baskets, and weave them into various kinds of floral wreaths for adorning the Lord in the temple.

The poet here gives an interesting description of the various types of floral wreaths and garlands which gives us an insight into the practice of the temple floral service in the period. He would place them on the Lord's image, sing some ~~devotional~~ songs in a very moving manner and chant His *Panchakshra* mantra. While he was doing this kind of physical service, he was befriended by the boy saint Jnana Sambandhar when he went to worship at Puhalur.

Muruha was continuing for long in this service of worship and reciting of the five syllables. In due course, when Sambandhar's wedding was celebrated at Nallur-Perumanam, Muruha also went there to attend it and attained eternal bliss by entering along with Sambandhar and the marriage party, the Divine Effulgence that appeared there.

16. SAINT RUDRA PASUPATI

"I am the Servant of Rudra Pasupati"

The Vedas and the chanting of the Vedas have been held in high esteem by the Saiva people in Tamilnad. The Sanskrit language was not considered alien by the people. The *Rudra Mantra* occupies a central position in all the Vedas; it is contained in the Krishna Yajur Veda, Kanda 4, Prapataka 5-7. In exactly the middle of the Vedas, (Prapataka 5, Adyaya 8, Mantra ii) is situated the Siva *Panchakshara mantra*, with the *pranava* prefixed : *OM Namas Sivaya (cha, Siva taraya cha* :

Hence the chanting of the Rudra or the *Rudra japa* had been held not only to be a highly meritorious act but also to confer in due course the Supreme Knowledge and ultimate union with Siva.

An enlightened soul who had always been chanting the Rudra mantra was Pasupati of Tiru-Talaiyur in the Kaveri delta. Born in a brahmin family there, he used to stand in the water in a lotus tank upto the neck and chant this mantra, day and night with folded hands held above the head. This steadfast *Japa* caused him to be known as Rudra-Pasupati.

In due course when his end came, he was united to the holy feet of Siva. No other particulars about his life are known. His unceasing *Japa* brought him eternal bliss. His life illustrates the great efficacy Saiva emblems have in releasing bhaktas from the earthly bonds and in conferring bliss.

Along with the story of Anayar, this Saint's story also tells us that many sacrifices or services are not necessary to obtain emancipation from the worldly ties, but that chanting of the mantra is itself efficacious enough to achieve this result.

17. SAINT TIRU-NALAIP-POVAR (NANDANA)

"I am the servant of he who would tomorrow go (to Chidambaram) in the right manner".

"When I heard and read the story of Nandanar and his lofty satyagraha, and his great success, my head bowed before his spirit, and all day long I have felt elevated to be able to be in a place hallowed by the holy feet of Nanda Nanda broke down every barrier and won his way to freedom, not by brag, not by bluster, but by the purest form of self suffering. He did not swear against his persecutors, he would not even condescend to ask his persecutors for what was his due. But he shamed them into doing justice by his lofty prayer, by the purity of his character, and, if one may put it in human language, he compelled God Himself to descend and made Him open the eyes of his persecutors. And what Nanda did in his time and in his own person, it is open to every one of us to do today in our own person" — *Mahatma Gandhi*.

The story of Nandanar (or simply Nanda, the untouchable Saint) can be stated in a few words.

Earlier than the fifth century A. C. a little boy was born in Adanur, an obscure village in Cholanad in a poor harijan family, who were farm labourers under a Brahmin master. Even from his birth he had a sense of dedication to Siva. From his early childhood, the boy had seen the clean and holy lives led by the high caste brahmins of the place. He had seen, although from a distance, how they all bathed in the morning, said their prayers, put on clean garments, worshipped in the temple and set about their business in a neat and disciplined manner. He had closely observed how their daily life was governed by spiritual values. This way of life very much attracted him and his heart yearned for a similar clean and godly life both for himself and for his people. His heart revolted from the unhealthy and pitiful squalour around him. When he spoke to his own people about this, they scoffed at him and said he was mad to think

of changing the way of life to which he was born. The higher class people considered his views revolutionary and undutiful, a sin against God. However Nanda altered his own life to suit a nobler way of living, while continuing to perform all the services required of him by his master. His mind was set upon having a vision of God as enshrined in the local temple. Needless to say, he was, by virtue of being a harijan, debarred even from going near the shrine. Undaunted, Nanda used to go there, stand in front of the temple as near as he was permitted, and pray.

This continued for a long time. A miracle did indeed happen. The sacred bull, the mount of Siva which was usually lying in front of the sanctum in the outer corridor obstructing the line of vision of the inner Sanctum, moved a few feet to the right, under the will of the Lord allowing Nanda a direct vision of the Deity in the inner sanctum. His joy knew no bounds and his heart danced in divine ecstasy. He stood there praying for quite a long time and thence forward continued to worship there every day.

In those days, a pilgrimage to Chidambaram (20 miles from Nanda's place) to see the Cosmic Dance of Lord Nataraja on the Ardra darsana day in the month of December-January was the supreme goal of all human endeavour. Nanda had heard about it and very fervently desired to go there. Reaching the outskirts of Tillai, he dared not go in, because of his low caste but went round the city with great devotion, many times, and even began to despair about having a vision of the Dance of Nataraja. But the Lord Nataraja who had seen the intense bakti of Nanda, ordered the Tillai andanar to purify Nandan by a fire bath and then to take him inside the temple into His very Presence. They did accordingly create the fire, went to Nandanar and told him, "Oh great soul, we have made the fire for your purification as ordered by the Lord. Please come". He went, bathed in the fire and came out in the form of a holy sage and was taken into the temple. Everyone saw him go into the inner Hall of Nataraja and thereafter he disappeared. Lord Nataraja immersed him in Eternal Bliss.

Such is the popular heart warming story of this poor untouchable labourer who, by his self suffering, discipline and self-effacing humility, was raised to the ranks of the Saints in the Tamil land. An image is installed in his honour in all the major Siva temples and the entire Tamil community, irrespective of caste, offers him worship.

Gandhiji calls Nanda a great Satyagrahi. True. Nanda crossed all barriers of caste and tradition with his single-minded devotion, disciplined purity of conduct, absolute humility and surrender. The achievement of Nanda some fifteen or twenty centuries ago, is one for all time to ponder upon, and seek to emulate.

Such is the story as narrated by Saint Sekkilar. But by the middle of the 18th century, a great gifted singer by name Gopalakrishna Bharati had newly written up the story as a fine musical opera, and it became immediately popular and also became a classic of its day too. No musical concert in the modern day is considered complete without a song of his composition ; the elements of bhakti and of music are so perfect in his songs.

He had made certain variations in the story and the variations alone are given below. Nandanar made preparations for going to Chidambanam months ahead. But being a servant of the brahmin master, he wanted to leave only with the master's permission. His own people, detided him ; the very idea was a blasphemy ! The master would not permit him. An untouchable to go to Chidambaram on pilgrimage was unheard of. The man must surely be mad ! The master set him several tasks, one after another. Ungrudgingly and cheerfully, Nanda by the grace of God completed each one of them. The brahmin could not but admire the diligence, promptness and thoroughness with which Nanda completed the tasks. But still, with his vast scriptural knowledge, he tried to dissuade Nanda from his purpose 'It is needless to go to Chidambaram to reach heaven, which can be made in one's own place. Truthful discharge of one's duties to his

'superiors by itself conferred a heavenly state,' and so on he argued. But Nanda would not swerve from the purpose set. The Brahmin could find no more excuse, either in work or in conduct to delay granting permission. Nanda was indeed all humility but the inner glow in him was compelling. We should say a miracle happened and the brahmin master was able to perceive the spiritual halo of Nanda. His heart was moved and he, in turn, with folded hands bowed before Nanda and sent him on his way to Chidambaram, with his blessings.

The end of the story is the same.

18 SAINT TIRU-KURIPPUT-TONDAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Tiru-Kurippu-Tondar"

Saints have been many in the Tamilnad. Most of them are historical figures, who have themselves sung songs or have been celebrated in the songs sung by the others. Two characteristics stand out in the lives of all the Saints-absolute surrender to God and the equality of all men before God. "All men are brothers" seems to be a favourite slogan of the second half of the modern century. It is remarkable to note that this doctrine was the keynote of the hagiology at any rate in the Tamilnad. Saints have been from all classes of society-princes and beggars, brahmins as well as the lowest classes, scholars and primitive tribes, and women too. All the lower castes are represented, and all of them have attained the final beatitude through love of God and service to godly men, thereby proving that all men are equal before God.

The story of Saint Tiruk-Kurippu Tondar illustrates the above statement. He was born in Kanchipuram in the washerman caste. Being of a pious and religious disposition, he took upon himself the service of washing the soiled linen of the men of God who visited the city. This he did in such an unobtrusive and timely manner that he earned the name

Tiruk-Kurippu-Tondar one who observed the needs of the bhaktas and served them through mere suggestion. His service was so very timely and selfless that it pleased God who desired that the greatness of the service of this humble devotee should be made known to the world.

Accordingly, one winter morning Lord Siva appeared before the Tondar in the guise of an indigent devotee, dressed in dirty rags. Tondar saw him, bowed before him and begged him to give his tattered clothes for washing. The poor devotee replied : "My friend, no doubt my clothes are very dirty and will certainly do well with a wash. But the air is very chill. I can leave it with you for washing only if you promise to return it to me dry after a wash before sunset. Otherwise, I shall be experiencing immense discomfort on account of the cold". Tondar agreed and took the clothes.

He took them to the washing yard and washed them partially. Then he placed them in the steam pot for steam washing as usual. Just at that moment, however, the sky became dark with black clouds and there was a heavy down-pour. Tondar waited for a long time : there was no sun and the rains did not stop. The sun had set and night had come on.

The poor washerman trembled to think of the plight of the aged devotee whose clothes he was now unable to dry. "I promised to return them dry before sunset. Now night has set in. I have not dried the clothes before this. What can the poor devotee do in this severe cold?" So saying Tondar went to the washing stone on which clothes used to be washed and knocked his head in dire despair and agony. A beautiful Hand shot out of the stone, caught his head and stopped it from knocking. Lord Siva with Uma appeared before Tondar and said ; "My friend, do not worry. We desired to make known to all the worlds your selfless devotion. You shall henceforth dwell in the heavens". Tondar went home praising the Lord, continued in His service as before and in the end reached eternal bliss at the Lotus Feet of the Lord.

This is a very simple story. A man's birth may be humble and obscure. But if he serves God or godly men steadfastly and selflessly, even according to his own humble station in life, that service pleases God and He confers the highest state of bliss on the person.

19. SAINT CHANDESVARA

"I am the servant of the great devotee Chandi, who acquired the other world by slashing the foot of his father who rose against his own worship of the Sivalinga, dutifully".

The last place to be worshipped in any Siva shrine today is the shrine of Chandesvara. In all temple festivals also, Chandesvara is given an important place. What is the story behind this ancient practice ?

The story of Chandesa is a very simple story of a simple child, who attained something more than sainthood, by his single minded devotion. The large sculptured image of Chandesa found at the northern side entrance of the Gangaikonda Cholapuram shrine has become world famous. The little boy is sitting with folded hands at the feet of Lord Siva, who with His Consort by his side, is tying a floral garland with both hands round the crown on the head of Chandesvara. This form of the Lord is now known as Chandesvara-anugraha murti, the Lord who showered His grace on Chandesvara. The story of Chandesvara which merited such unusual consideration from Lord Siva is briefly told.

He was born as the son of Echadatta in a poor brahmin family in the village of Tiru-Chey-nallur in Tanjavur district, some centuries before Christ. His name was Vicharasarman. While going to school one morning along with children of his own age to learn the scriptures, the little boy saw a cowherd beating up a cow mercilessly. He was immensely pained to see it. So he went up to the cowherd, rebuked him for the great crime he was committing by beating

up this harmless and sacred animal, and then and there decided that the best job for himself was the tending of cows.

Accordingly with the permission of the owners he took over the duty of tending the cows. He led the cows to the grazing grounds the next day and looked after them with true zeal. He kept them in shade during the severe sun, cut grass for them whenever grass was not readily available and took them to watering places where pure water was to be had. At sunset he gently drove them back to their respective sheds. Under his tender and solicitous care, the animals looked brighter and healthier and yielded much more milk. Every one was happy.

The cows were so happy with the careful tending of the little boy that their udders were always full of milk. When he took them to the river Manni (a branch of the holy river Kaveri) which was close by for a drink and bath, they all surrounded him and milk was always flowing from the udder. The boy saw this. His mind, trained in the ritualistic forms of worship of Lord Siva in his home and in the local temple, naturally thought that the milk could be used to bathe His Form. Accordingly, he made a temple of sand on the bank of the river, heaped a handful of sand into an image of Sivalinga and worshipped this image with potfuls of milk and flowers. This worship of the innocent boy on the sands of the river was quite pleasing to the Lord. Besides the milk used up by the boy in his abhisheka of Siva, the cows continued to yield the usual quantity of milk in their homes also.

One day, however, a mischievous neighbour saw the abhisheka of the boy and reported to the people that the boy was pouring cows' milk into sand under the guise of grazing the cows. Naturally the people were upset and so took Echadatta father of the boy, to task. Echadattan pleaded ignorance of his son's activity and then proceeded to investigate. He went to the river bank to the spot where his son was reported to have been wasting milk and hid himself in the branches of a tree to see what happened. Vichara sarman came as usual, bathed in the river, made a temple and image of God, gathered

flowers and pots of milk and proceeded with his worship. When his father saw all this from his hiding place in the tree, he was in a terrible rage. He jumped down from the tree, railed at the boy using foul language, and finding that this could not disturb the boy from his worship, smacked him on the back with a stick. The young boy immersed in the worship did not feel the repeated beating but continued with his abhisheka of milk. Thereupon his father in a great fury kicked the milk pots with his foot. The boy now noticed the disturbance to his worship, looked up and saw his father. Angry at his sinful act, he took a small stick lying nearby and struck at the man's feet with it. The stick miraculously changed into a hatchet and severed the foot of Echadatta in two. He fell down dead. Quite unaware of this, the boy then continued with his worship.

When the boy proceeded to continue the puja, Siva appeared before him, lifted him up and said, "Our little boy, you had cut asunder the foot of your own father for his irreligious act. Hereafter, We shall be your father. You shall be the head of our forces. You will henceforth be known as Chandi-Isa. You will have a crown, get our own food offerings and garlands, and have also a separate shrine in all our temples". So saying, He took a wreath of *cassia* flowers from His matted locks and wound it round the head of the little boy. Echadatta, father of the boy, was also saved by the Grace of God and reached the heavens.

Such is the story of this little boy, who by his unhesitating devotion attained a place of worship in the temples. Not only is he one of the canonised Saiva Saints : he has also risen to the state of having a separate shrine dedicated to him in all the Siva temples and a daily worship there. Whenever a procession of Lord Siva is taken out along the main streets of a temple during festivals, his image also accompanies as the fifth murti. The worship of Siva in the temple is considered complete only if the devotee goes to the shrine of Chandesa in the end and offers worship. The story of Chandesa adds one more name to the long list of little children like Dhruva, Prahlada etc., who attained to final beatitude through their unfaltering devotion.

20. SAINT TIRUNAVUKKARASAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Tirunavukkarasu whose greatest glory was the glory of Grace."

The centuries V to VII A. D. marked the supremacy of the Pallava dynasty in Tamilnad. The rulers had their headquarters at Kanchipuram, a city celebrated in legend and history as the City of great Learning. Jainism held sway there under royal patronage and there was considerable religious persecution of the Saivas. Into this atmosphere was born Marul-nikki (the dispeller of darkness), later to be widely known as Saint Appar, the Father.

He was born as the second child in an average agriculturist family, at Amur a village in South Arcot district, the first child being a daughter, Tilakavati. She had grown up into a handsome maiden and was betrothed to a young man, Kalippahai. Just after the betrothal, there was a general mobilisation and this young man was also drafted into the army and sent out with a detachment to engage an invading force. While he was away fighting, both the parents of the children died. News came that after several valiant fights Kalippahai was himself killed in battle. Overwhelmed with grief, Tilakavati wanted to give up her life, but her young brother fell at her feet and threatened to give up his own life if she did not change her mind and live to comfort him. Accordingly, she lived on as the guardian of the boy. (The story of Tilakavati is given in great detail in the section on women saints.)

The boy grew up and in course of time mastered all the sacred books there were. His studies into the court religion carried him quite deep into Jainism. He joined a Jain monastery and was ordained a leader thereof, in the name of Dharmasena. This deeply hurt his sister, who was a devout follower of Siva. She went to Tiru Adihai, a famous Siva shrine nearby and prayed to Siva to reclaim her erring brother into the fold of her forefathers. Tiru Adihai is the

Tripura asuras, allegorically representing the three malas or bonds of the soul.

As is the case everywhere, history and legend go together to make up the story of saints. So also here. There was divine intervention in the re-conversion of Marul-nikki to the Saiva fold. Siva appeared in her dream and comforted her saying, "Your brother had undergone many penances in a former birth. We shall cause a severe colic to afflict him and then redeem him". A miracle did occur in response to Tilakavati's prayers. Dharmasena had an acute stomach pain and all remedy - medical as well as magical - tried in the Jain monastery only tended to aggravate his pain. At the height of his suffering, he sent word to his sister for help. She refused to go to his Jain monastery. He decided to go to her and accordingly covering his whole body went stealthily at the dead of night to her at Tiru Adihai and begged her for help in his miserable affliction. She gave him Siva's sacred ash, and took him to the temple. When he had a *darshan* of the Lord there, all his pain vanished. Not only that : the muse of poesy settled on his tongue, and he began to pour forth his soul into a fine delightful poetry of absolute surrender to God and to sing of the experience of His Divine Grace. Thenceforward he came to be called "Tiru-Navuk-Arasu", the Prince of Divine Utterances. From that moment, he cast off all his shackles and knew of no master but He. Immediately he set himself the task of cleaning the temple and temple premises with a hand hoe as a token of manual service to Siva.

The Jains could not take Dharmasena's conversion with equanimity. They were afraid that the breaking away of this top man was but the thin end of a wedge which would cleave asunder the royal throne from Jainism and bring about its downfall. They prevailed upon the Pallava Emperor, Mahendra Varma, to call back the deserter and punish him. When the King's messengers accordingly went to call him, he replied them with a fine song now classical in the language: "We are subject to none but He. We do not owe any allegiance to your king". However they prevailed upon him to go and he went to the King.

They placed him in a lime kiln which should have burnt him; but no, he was singing on the cool shelter of the Lord's Feet and came out of the kiln unharmed. Then they fed him poison. He sang on the Lord that drank the *Hilahila* poison in order that the world might live : the poison became nectar to him. The Jains told the King that he overcame the effects of the poison with the mantras he had learnt at their camp earlier and caused him to be placed before a mad elephant so that it could trample him to death. He prayed to Lord Siva who had an elephant - faced son (Vinayaka). The elephant bowed to him and turning round trampled to death many of the men who had trained it on him.

We see that the saint always faced his persecutors, not with hatred, but with a prayer to God. He placed himself in the hands of God and in that spirit of surrender knew that no harm could come to him.

Finally, they tied him up to a stone and dropped him into the middle of the sea. Chanting God's name, he came ashore, the very stone serving as a life belt for him! From then on he made a systematic tour of Siva's shrines in the country, singing melodious and rapturous songs of supreme beauty and divine ecstasy. His life thereafter was one of absolute surrender to God, wholly humble and egoless.

Any number of miracles occurred in his life, proving that, to one who has wholly surrendered himself to the Supreme Will, nothing is impossible. The first miracle was the repentance of the King himself who fell at his feet to seek his pardon for the wrongs done. He became a Saiva again and did much to re-establish Saivism in the land. History tells us that scores of cave temples and stone temples were built by him for Siva.

Continuing his journey to temples, Tirunavukkarasu prayed that the trident and the bull, the insignia of Siva, be impressed on his arms. This was accordingly done at the great temple at Pennagadam. He then visited Chidambaram, the shrine of Nataraja the Cosmic Dancer where He seemed to welcome him with the words "Welcome my man, when

“did you arrive ?” He sang there many soul-stirring songs of his experience of the Divine Presence. Then he proceeded to Sikali to meet Tiru Jnanasambandhar.

Sambandhar was a boy saint, who had been visited by Divine Grace at the age of three. He was a junior contemporary of our saint. When Sambandhar saw Tirunavukkarasu, he called him “Appar!” (My father). From then on, Tirunavukkarasu came to be known as Appar. Together, the two visited many shrines. Then he left him to visit other shrines on his own. At Ticunallur he prayed to Siva to place His lotus feet on his head. This blessing was also conferred upon him.

Then Appar went to Tingalur and was the guest of Appudi. Here he brought back to life Appudi’s son, who was bitten by a poisonous snake. (The story of Appudi who is himself a canonized saint, has been narrated separately later.) At the next shrine he visited, namely Tiruppazhanam, he praised the devotion of Appudi in a song. Visiting Tiru Arur he sang many songs there and felicitated the services of Naminandi adihal. Then he reached Tiruppuhalur. Here he was joined by Sambandhar and together they again visited several temples. Staying as the guest of Saint Muruhar there, they had the company of Saint Siruttondar and Saint Tiru Nilanakkar. At Tirukkadavur Saint Kunguliyakkalayar entertained them.

Then Appar along with Sambandhar reached Tiru Vizhimizhalai where both of them were given gold coins by God to enable them to overcome the local famine conditions and feed their devotees and other humanity. They then went together to the Vedaranyam shrine where the main entrance had been closed by the Vedas after their worship in bygone days and the people were using a side entrance. At the suggestion of Sambandhar, Appar sang a song praying to the Lord for the gates to open. They opened when he sang the last verse of the song. Then the Lord directed him to go for worship at Tiru Vaymur which he did. Emissaries from the Pandiya

queen came to invite Sambandhar to their country to rid it of the Jain domination. Appar, who had underwent the greatest persecution at the hands of the Jains, tried to dissuade Sambandhar because of his young age from going there and himself offered to go. But Sambandhar decided to go because of his confidence in the succour of the Lord. Then leaving Sambandhar to go south, Appar went north.

A unique occurrence took place at Palayarai, a former capital of the Chola emperors, now in ruins. The Jains of the place had concealed the Siva temple there and had converted part of it into a Jain shrine. When Appar heard of this, he stopped there and commenced a penance for the restoration of the original worship there. He fasted for some time. The ruler restored the temple to its former mode of worship, and prayed for the Saint's forgiveness.

At another place Tirup-Pajnili when he was weary with travel, Siva Himself appeared before him in the guise of a brahmin and gave him nourishing food and drink.

Then he went north and desired to see Mount Kailas, the legendary abode of Siva. In the travel, his feet and legs wore out; mounting the hill, he crawled on his hands; hands wore out, he rolled on his body; Siva appeared before him in disguise and tried to dissuade him from going further. Appar was firm in his resolve not to return without having a vision of Kailas. Then Siva made him bathe in a tank there and arise miraculously out of the waters at Tiruvaiyaru in the Chola country. There a divine vision of Godhood was vouchsafed to him. He saw all creation on earth as the manifest forms of the Lord, the Lord and His Consort, Sakti. He was greatly thankful for this vision which he has immortalised in beautiful song.

Again he met Sambandhar in the Chola country. Hearing that Sambandhar was passing through his place he got into Sambandhar's retinue unobtrusively and was bearing the palanquin on which Sambandhar rode. Sambandhar asked, "Where is Appar?" He replied "I am here, blessed in the service of carrying you". Sambandhar jumped down and embraced him. Then he went south and into the Pandiya

country and later came back to his favourite Chola country at the ripe old age of eightyone.

The end was near. He had merged himself with the Universal Spirit and was overflowing with it. Once when he was worshipping at Tiruppuhalur, gems were strewn on his path but he threw them aside like so much potsherd. Damsels with their erotic dances were powerless to entice and divert him from his humility, non-attachment to worldly things and service to the Lord. Finally on a day in April-May, his soul was freed and came to rest under the lifted foot of Nataraja at Puhalur.

Such in brief is the life history of this noble humble saint who placed service before self and God before everything. He is one of the four religious preceptors of the Saivas in South India.

His work as a man of God and his Philosophy as expounded in 312 songs of 3,066 verses he had sung require to be discussed in greater detail.

II

We have seen that Appar (father) was so called by Sambandhar and that he lived to the ripe age of eightyone. He lived during the period 590-671 A.D. He was one of the four religious preceptors (or Samaya Acharyas) of the Saivites and was the oldest of them all and the earliest also. In all the South Indian temples built after the 7th century, we find stone images dedicated to the four preceptors. In most large temples there are copper or bronze images also and festivals are conducted in their honour.

In all these images, we generally see Saint Appar with a small hce held close to his right arm and resting against the shoulder. Each icon in a temple has its own distinguishing marks to define clearly what form it symbolizes. The hce is the symbol of Saint Appar. What does it denote? We had said that Appar had sung 312 songs in 3066 verses. This number is indeed large, only Saint Sambandhar exceeding it. And the proverb goes in Tamil that 'for accuracy and strength in utterance you go to Appar'. But his penchant is not composing

and singing, but manual labour for the temple. In each temple that he visited, he made a round of the main streets and then went round to the inner courts of the temple. several times Very often filth and dirt had accumulated there. At other times, weeds had grown on the pavements or on the outer walls and the roofs. Appar attached great importance to physical service. With hoe in hand he went around collecting dirt and filth in a basket. He plucked out weeds and such like shrubs and removed them, thereby making the temple streets and temple premises neat and clean for worshippers. This service he did in all the temples he visited and he did it to his last day. He was no doubt a sage and a saint ; he was indeed a composer and a singer too. But above all these, he was a physical worker in God's service, a manual labourer first.

Society has considerably changed from the days of Appar to the present 20th century. There is so much talk now of social welfare and social service leagues. Educated people are asked to go into slums and do rural service and social welfare work. Conditions were a little different in the days of Appar. The centre of society and the pivot of all social activity was the temple. Weddings were done there, elders met there, councils were held there, learned scriptures were expounded there, education was imparted there and certainly, worship was done there. Sometimes the Presence of the Lord was even a court of justice. Poor feeding was also done in the temples. Thus the temple was the central core of all social life. Into this centre Appar introduced the spirit of social service. Service to God and service to mankind were not different then. Hence the services of Appar were productive of great benefit to humanity. Posterity was grateful to this great soul for the standard he had set in this regard. The historian Sekkilar always mentions the hoe as the inseparable tool in the hands of Appar. All temples glorify it and have placed it in his hands in all their images.

An incident which happened in the life of Appar very well illustrates this aspect. When Appar was making a tour of worship in the shrines along with Sambandhar, both of

them together with their large retinue of followers, reached Tiru-Vizhi-mizhalai, now a large shrine in the heart of the Tanjavur district. Just at the time of their visit a famine was wide spread in the area on account of the failure of the seasonal monsoons. Local people were unable to feed the vast multitudes that thronged the temple following Appar and Sambandhar. There was great concern among the devotees regarding their food. At that time, the Lord of the shrine appeared before the saints in their dream and said, "Friends, do not be anxious. We shall provide a gold coin for each of you on the altar on the east and the west. Your followers may purchase grains with the gold and feed the multitudes." Appar and Sambandhar accordingly took the gold and gave it to their followers. They in turn purchased the necessary groceries, prepared food and invited all the hungry in the neighbourhood and gave them sumptuous food.

This was going on for some time. However, Sambandhar, being a young man, (he was 12 when Appar was about 70) noticed that in Appar's camp, food was distributed before noon, while in his own camp, food was given always at a later hour. He called the head steward and asked him the reason for the delay.

He replied: "No doubt both the camps receive similar gold. The groccers do not charge any discount for Appar's gold but willingly receive it and supply provisions, while they demand a discount in our gold and do not willingly take this. Hence the delay in getting the provisions and in cooking and serving". We should remember Sambandhar was then just an impulsive young boy, not yet in his teens.

This set him thinking. He mused and said in a part humorous vein, "I just go and sing in the temple. But Appar goes to the temple and does manual work by weeding out and cleaning the premises. Hence he receives better gold than I. This is but proper." The story goes on that he went to the temple the next day, prayed for discountfree gold and got it thence forward.

The point deserving attention here is that it was Divine will that Appar who did physical labour deserved greater consideration than Sambandhar who was merely a singer. This was also the view of Sambandhar, contemporary of Appar, and of Sekkilar, the 12th century historian. We should look at the story with a sense of humour and should not take it too literally.

These are days when there is always a demand for better wages for the physical worker. That this is a legitimate demand is conceded even by our saints and by the Lord God Himself, according to this legend.

Elsewhere Appar sings : "No doubt it is the duty of the Lord to sustain all (including myself). But my duty is to perform my service without anxiety for the results." This message of Appar, based on a spirit of selfless service to God through service to humanity, teaches us not only that all worship but also that all labour is dignified. It is indeed a message for all times and climes.

The legend narrated above tells us that this view is shared by other Saints and is acceptable to God Himself. Even today, our temples and public places are not all that they should be. There is a lot to be done in making them clean and beautiful. This service can easily be done voluntarily by people who use them. In this context, the life and work of Saint Appar is a heartening beacon light, focussing our attention on this aspect of social service. He has raised it to the level of service to God. Truly we may say that Appar is a *Saint for Cleanliness*.

Satyagraha is a new term invented by Gandhi for the steadfast adherence to Truth as one saw it. It is a pity that none of our great leaders brought the story of Appar to Gandhi's notice. He has mentioned Saint Nandanar as the first Satyagrahi. No doubt he was attracted by Nandanar's struggles to have his claims for religious worship recognized as those of any other human being. Nandanar belonged to a down-trodden community. But Saint Appar was no less a

great *satyagrahi*. The Palayarai incident reveals this aspect of his personality.

Returning from Vedaranyam, he saw a vimana at Palayara and was told that the Jains then had covered the Siva temple with sand and that the *vimana* was the one of the hidden Siva temple. Appar was considerably pained and, saying that he would not leave the place without seeing the Lord in that temple, stayed at a place nearby and fasted. The Lord told this to the local ruler in a dream. He came immediately to the site with his ministers, drove away the Jains, removed the sand, opened up the temple for worship and fell at the feet of Appar. Appar was glad that he was able to worship in the temple and in due time left the place and continued his pilgrimage. This is an instance when Appar's penances moved the king to action.

III

Appar, as has already been said, was one of the four spiritual teachers of Saivism in Tamilnad and he was also the first in point of time. Different religions have evolved different systems of philosophy and in Hinduism itself there are different systems even in Tamilnad, developed during various periods by great seers and spiritual teachers. Saivism in Tamilnad claims to be as old as the land itself. It has four Acharyas or teachers, who lived during the 7th to the 9th centuries and directed the people along a pathway to Siva. Its distinctive philosophy has been culled by later philosophical expounders from the psalms and hymns sung by these four teachers.

Now, this philosophy elaborates four paths by which it is possible for the individual soul to merge itself with the Universal Spirit. Saint Appar is considered to be the teacher who illustrated in his own life the first of the paths, namely bodily service to the Lord, and thereby attained that Union. Appar symbolizes the *charja marga* one of the pathways to God, the simplest way, because of a large volume of verses where he has sung of the physical service to the temple. The following is a well known song :

“The value of smearing the floor of the temple premises with cow dung is ten times more meritorious than that of sweeping it. (In his day most temples had only a mud floor.) If one makes a fine floral garland for Him he can easily ascend the heavens. Those that light a lamp in the temple achieve the Supreme Wisdom. Oh, how shall I describe the boundless grace that He will bestow on those that sing in His presence !”

His is a positive philosophy, which is not at all content with mere negation, He is not very anxious to reach heaven and be free from misery in this world but he wants the happiness accruing out of worship of the Lord in this world. In a world which always prayed for birthlessness he sings : “If only one can realise the joy of Nataraja’s dance here, birth in this world is certainly welcome”.

The name of the Lord is a cure for all evils from which godly men try to run away. “Just as a flame reduces to ashes firewood heaped even sky high, so the Lord’s name destroys all evil.”

All Saints have transcended the barriers of caste and creed. Appar is prepared to worship one from even the lowest class if he is a lover of God. He spurns all material goods and riches and power. When he was cleaning the premises of the Puhalur temple, with every turn of his spade, there were revealed precious gems, pearls and gold, but he treated them as mere potsherd and simply heaped all these along with weeds and dirt and removed them.

When the messengers of the Pallava Emperor called him in the name of the king, he asked,

*“Who are you that call me ?
Who is he that you call king ?
We are no longer subject
To any one on earth
Death has no power over us*

*Nor hell has any fear for us,
We are the servants of the One Lord
And glorify only Him,
We enjoy eternal happiness".*

No one has voiced forth the independence of the spirit as emphatically as Appar has done in these lines. He has also a word of solace for the unevolved: "Oh Friend, Think of God, either out of love or even out of fear, but think of God".

Appar followed rigorously the ritual of worship daily. He always sings : "Lord, I have never failed to bathe Thee in fresh water or deck Thee with fragrant flowers. I have never neglected to pray to Thee with sweet Tamil songs". Yet very often he enjoins men to rise above ritualism and seek the Lord through a complete surrender of the self, through an inward and spiritual searching:

"Unless one is able to meditate upon Him and realise Him in his own heart, pilgrimage to holy places, recitation of the scriptures, fasting and penances and bathing in the holy waters etc. will be of little avail. Oh, ye foolish people who are merely chanting the scriptures! If you realise that there is only the one Supreme Being which is to be worshipped by you, He will bestow His Grace on you in a second."

Emotional longing and emotional enjoyment also find a place in the songs of Appar. He likens himself to a love-sick maiden and appeals to her companions, to birds, flowers, the wind and the bees, to secure for her a return of God's love, or grace.

It is generally thought that the Saints are of the other world, that they have nothing to do with this world, that they are not helpful to society. What we have said so far is enough to disprove that. Appar was, as we have shown, a social worker, a reformer, one who placed service before self, one who effaced self altogether. His reform and service were built on the bedrock of what is True and Everlasting and not on what is transient.

In hundreds of verses. Appar sings that God is not one to be feared but one that is sweet to meditate upon, one that always confers lasting happiness, one that is sweeter than any fruits imaginable, sweeter than the pleasures of the earth. "Oh ye men, will ye enjoy a sweet fruit when it is given to you? Drop your shackles and then, God will taste to you sweeter than any fruit. He is sweeter than fruit, sweeter than candy, and sweeter than all worldly pleasures. "

Appar has got over the memory of the petty persecution of his early days and sees in Siva the Universal Spirit which manifests Its own Self in the various religions. "Even when narrow minded persons found different religions out of spite, Our Lord pervades them all and approves of them."

God the Supreme Being not only transcends all material things but also all thought. He manifests Himself in every one of his creations but at the same time is beyond all of them. He cannot be grasped through the senses or through word or thought but still he can be reached through the contemplation of His manifest forms. He who is formless does indeed dwell in all the forms in which he is worshipped in the temples.

To Appar, God is always immanent, ever present, always with him, guiding him in all his actions. "He is enshrined in the hearts of those who meditate upon Him. None is so dear to me as myself. But there is one who is sweeter to me than myself and that is He, who is my very breath, who is all things around me and who is also well enshrined within me".

Appar exemplifies in his own life an exalted and noble way of selfless love and devotion. He is considered to have followed the path of the servant, termed the *Dasa marga*. The Lord is all Mercy and He is always anxious to shower His mercy on us. "Pray to Him. He never says 'later'." He knows what is good for us and will relieve us from our distress. *Karma* is not everything. *Grace* transcends everything else and it is the mortal's duty to do his work in a selfless way, to consider all work as God's service, and always be in a state of preparedness for receiving Grace. Religion is not mere

intellectual practice ; it is not merely a heritage ; it consists not merely in an emotional state. Everything plays a part in religion but it embraces the entire personality of man. There should be a harmonious integration in all his thoughts, words and deeds, well and consciously grounded in His Will. Then Divine Grace reaches him, purifying and strengthening him, and gives him everlasting bliss through union with the Universal Spirit. As pointed out often, humility and absolute surrender are the key notes of Appar's life and philosophy.

21. SAINT KULACCHIRAI

"I am the servant of the servants of Kulacchirai, given the title Perunambi".

He was born in Manamelkudi in the Pandiya territory in the seventh century A.D. He was the Chief Minister of the Pandiyan King Nedumaran and was given the title Perunambi by the monarch for his services to the state. But when the King embraced Jainism, Kulacchirai did not change his religious allegiance. He continued in Saivism, great in his love for Siva and His bhaktas. He did not discriminate among the bhaktas by caste or service but bowed to them and fed them if they were just devotees of Sankara (Siva). He was the only support to Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi when she stayed on in Saivism and he helped her to invite Tirujnanasambandhar to the Pandiya country for the propagation of Saivism. His services to Siva at Madurai have been praised in several verses by Sambandhar. He revered Sambandhar and was instrumental in impaling the Jains who were vanquished in their contests by Sambandhar and had themselves offered to get themselves impaled.

22. SAINT PERU MILALAIK-KURUMBAR

"I am the servant of Perumilalaik-kurumbar".

In the history of the Saiva saints, we always find devotees worshipping and doing physical service to God and godly men. Of the four *padas*, we always meet with *charya*, the path of service; *kriya* also we meet with occasionally, the path of ritualistic worship; *yoga* and *jnana* we meet with only rarely. The story of this saint has reference to the path of *yoga* practice.

He was born in the village of Milalai in probably a *kurumba* tribe. He served the Siva bhaktas by knowing their needs without being told and by giving them food and money. In due time he came to know of the eminence of Sundarar who had sung the *Tiru-Tordat-Tohai* and worshipped him by thought, word and deed. This in turn endowed him with the eight celebrated *siddhis*. He was always uttering the PANCHAKSHARA mantra which was kith and kin, riches and the very senses for him. This led him on to higher reaches in yogic practice. Sundarar went to Tiru Anjaikkalam from where he was to be summoned to Siva's presence in Kailas. Kurumbar learned this clearly through his *yoga*. "Sundara is going to Kailas tomorrow. How can I live in this world without him?" he mused. He concentrated on his Yoga practice. His *brahmarandra* opened and his soul reached Kailas even before Sundarar reached there.

23. THE LADY SAINT OF KARAIKKAL

"I am the servant of Peyar".

Gandhiji, we have seen, had introduced an era of freedom of thought and action for the individual, man or woman, consistent with the nobler values of life. At his behest, men and women had been able to transcend all limitations of social ties of family, caste or creed, and jump into the fire of

the national struggle for independence. This was possible because his appeal was to the inner self, which, when occasion demanded, could come to a bold decision and sever all bonds, and rise supreme.

Women in ancient times too were able to transcend all social barriers. One such was the Lady of Karaikkal, also called the Mother, a canonised Saint of the fifth century A. C.

She was born as Punitavati (the pure girl) in a very prosperous and deeply religious merchant family of Karaikkal (a French enclave on the east coast of Tamilnadu in pre-independence days in the midst of Tanjavur district). From her childhood, she was of a religious temperament, which grew up into one of great devotion to men of God too. She was married in due course to a rich young merchant, Paramadattan and was leading a quiet domestic life, enriched by devotion and godliness. She fed visiting Siva bhaktas, and gave them money and clothing according to their requirement. Life went on smoothly, till one fine morning, she had to face a crisis which in its wake, brought on miracles too.

One day, a servant brought to her two sweet mango fruits from her husband presented to him by some clients. She received them and kept them. Just then a hungry mendicant came there for food. She welcomed him and proceeded to feed him. Rice had been cooked but not any of the usual side dishes. (A good host never gives only rice without any side dish for a guest.) So she served him the rice and very naturally gave away one mango to the guest in the place of a side dish. He ate it, blessed her and went away happy.

After sometime, Datta came home and proceeded to take his lunch as usual. She served him the second mango. Finding it good, he asked for the other mango which he had sent to her.

Trouble began to brew from here for the poor girl. Punitavati and Datta were a loving couple and we would expect that he would naturally allow one mango for his wife's lunch. Perhaps a fit of gluttony came over him, when he demanded the second mango also for himself.

Non-plussed, the poor girl unthinkingly stepped into the larder, as though to do his bidding. His unusual gluttony made her forget herself. She could easily have told him that the mango was gifted away. She forgot to do so. She prayed, "O Lord what shall I do ! My husband wants the second mango too. If I do not present it, he may not believe me". Her prayer was answered and a mango appeared miraculously on her uplifted hands. Very eagerly she served this to Datta.

He ate it and certainly through divine will, he found this unusually delicious. He grew suspicious and by patient questioning, elicited the truth from her. Unfortunately for her he wanted to test her statement. So he ordered her to get him another mango from the heavens. If she could get one mango from God, she could get a second also from God, was his line of thinking. The poor woman was now really in distress. Out of the depths of her heart, she prayed to God to rescue her from the plight and it was God's will that she have another mango. She gave it to Datta who received it with great wonder. But the moment it touched his hand, it disappeared.

Now it was the poor man's turn to be awe struck. He believed that Punitavati was some celestial being, in the guise of a wife. He concealed his awe and kept cool and normal. He revealed the incident to no one. After a few days' stay in the home, he put out to sea on business on a ship in the usual manner and disappeared. He crossed the seas to distant lands, made a flourishing business there, and after a time returned finally and settled down in a town in the Pandiya country unknown to his people. There he married again and had a daughter whom he named Punitavati after his first wife at Karaikkal.

Unaware of these developments, Punitavati was living in Karaikkal fondly expecting the return of her husband. In due course, news of Datta came to her people, that he was living as an affluent merchant in Pandinad. Anxious to re-unite her with Datta, they took her in a palanquin to his new place. He met them with his second wife and child and

prostrated before Punitavati saying, "I am well, through your grace. This little child bears your name". Her people remonstrated, "How can you prostrate before your own wife ?" To them he replied, "My friends, this is no human being. This is an angel from the heavens to whom you too should do homage".

This was something abnormal. In the Hindu family, the husband is the overlord, entitled to obeisance from his wife ; he never falls at the feet of his wife !

The young wife Punitavati was naturally much discomfited. When her husband behaved in this manner, her ideas of re-union and of home were shattered. She prayed to God to take away her physical frame which she had been bearing for him and give her the form of a ghost. Immediately, by the grace of God, her body, flesh and blood fell off from her and she was given the skeleton form of a ghost. All her people in awe and wonder left her and went away.

In the form of the ghost, she sang a poem of 100 *venba* verses on Siva known as the *Arbhuta Tiru Antadi*, the miraculous *Antadi*, exclaiming that she had become one of the group of ghosts worshipping Him. She sang also another poem of 20 verses, named the *Irattar-mani-malai* (the garland of twin gems). Then in the form of a ghost she left the place, and full of a religious frenzy to have a vision of God, went to Mount Kailas, His celestial abode. As she was ascending the steps Uma, the Consort of Siva, wondered at the approaching form and exclaimed, "Here is a form of a ghost coming up the steps ! O what love and devotion !" Lord Siva said, "This is the Mother that glorifies us. She prayed for this form and got it". And as Punitavati the ghost form came near, the Heavenly Father greeted her with the words, "Welcome, Mother !"

Thus, this meek young woman became the mother for the Heavely Father, who has no mother, and who is Himself the Father and the Mother for all creation.

She fell at His feet crying, "Oh Father!" Asked by Him what she wanted, she said "I desire no more births. If I am to be born, let me never forget You. I desire to witness Your Dance, seated under Your Foot".

She was promised eternal rest at Tiru-Alankadu, a shrine near Madras. She went there and was praying to the Lord until she attained eternal rest at His feet.

This lady thence forward came to be known as "The Mother from Karaikkal."

II

She poured forth her joy at the vision of the heavenly Father and her ecstasy on the experience of His grace into fine musical verses. 143 of her songs are now available. They form part of the rich legacy of devotional literature in the Tamil language.

Her lyrics are the natural and soulful outpourings of an extremely joyous but simple being, which had a blissful experience of divine manifestation. The songs are all simple. Half of them is a description of a humble girl's vision, while the other half is a fervent picture of heavenly beatitude and high philosophy. There has not been till her day any expression of philosophic thought of the range and depth which we find in her songs. She is thus the fore-runner of a new cult of the Tamils, which is an advance on all previous concepts of God, man and matter. Her thoughts are responsible in a large measure for the evolution of the Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy from the next century onwards. More than forty millions of the Tamil speaking race owe allegiance to this religion.

We shall be content here with just referring to a few thoughts from Karaikkal Ammai.

*"It is He that perceives,
that makes me perceive, and
is the instrument of perception
and also the objects perceived."*

Here she forestalls the *Advaita* of Sankara by three centuries and a half. Who knows, probably Sankara the Tamilian, might have got the inspiration for his philosophy from her song,

The form of the Lord is unknowable. This she expresses in a humorous strain:

*My Lord, when I became Thy slave,
I did not know Thy Form.
Even today
I do not know Thy Form
When others ask me
What is the Form of your Lord,
What shall I reply?
Tell me, what is Thy Form?*

In another verse she describes the same dazzling Form through a child's eyes:

*His Form is dazzling like the morning rays
His Sacred Ash shines like the noon rays.
His matted locks resemble the rays of the evening sun.
His throat appears like the darkness of the night following.*

*We have overcome Death,
The cruel hell has receded from us
Taking refuge in the Lotus Feet of the Lord
Who shot the arrow
Which burnt away the three fortresses,
We have cut asunder the roots
Of the ancient karmas good and bad.*

With a childlike ecstasy, she says :

*Who can see Hara hereafter?
We have imprisoned Him,
Out of our own strong rights,*

*Within our own heart, and
Covered Him up with the blanket of Love.*

*Let them say
He is the Lord of the heavens,
that He dwells in the heavens.
But I say, the Supreme Being,
that is All Knowledge,
dwells in my heart.*

“It is Grace that rules the world, Grace that liberates me from bonds, and Grace through which I perceive the Truth. I am therefore in harmony with all things in the Universe.”

“I treasure God as the sweetest thing in my heart. Is there anything beyond me ?”

“Those that are learned in the scriptures go astray. But in whatever form we worship Him, He comes to us in that form”.

24. SAINT APPUDI

“ I am the servant of the great person Appudi ”.

The lives of the saints generally emphasize two aspects of truth for all time - absolute surrender to the Supreme Will and the equality of all beings. These two aspects are very well illustrated in the life of Appudi.

Appudi was born in a brahmin family in Tingalur, a small village near Tiruvaiyaru in Tanjavur district, by about 620 A.D. Coming of a highly religious family, he had heard of his great contemporary, Saint Appar, who had won over to Saivism, the Pallava Emperor of Kanchipuram, Mahendra Varman. He had heard in detail of the ordeals which Appar went through, his devotion to Siva, the inspiring hymns he had sung and the several miracles in his life (vide section 20). Even without seeing the Saint in the flesh, Appudi considered himself in

service bound to Appar, in thought, word and deed. Appar was then known by the name of Tirunavakkarasu – the Prince of words, in recognition of the sweet and soulful songs sung by him.

Appudi, impressed by the acts of manual service performed by Tirunavukkarasu in all the temples he went to, himself organised various services of public utility and social welfare. He built many rest houses and watersheds along highways, parks, roads and drinking water tanks etc. In each one of these, he had erected tablets with the name of the service- Tirunavukkarasu Rest House, Tirunavukkarsu Watershed, Tirunavukkarasu Park, Tirunavukkarasu Road, Thirunavukkarasu Tank etc. No where did he cause his own name to be engraved.

This was going on for some time. Saint Appar, who was making a systematic tour of all the shrines, worshipped at Tiruvaiyaru, and was passing along Appudi's place on his way to the next shrine. Here he found a beautiful park with a watershed close by. Halting there with his followers in the cool shade, he was much impressed by the shade and gentle breeze along the neat highway. On looking round, he saw the name boards : Tirunavukkarasu Park, Tirunavukkarasu Watershed, Tirunavukkarasu Road etc. Immensely surprised, he enquired and learnt the history of Appudi. Anxious to meet him, Appar learnt that his place was quite near and so directed his steps to Appudi's house. On meeting him there, Appar asked him, "Sir, your name is not engraved in these places. What is the need for engraving another's name thereon ?" Appudi got angry and burst out : "Who are you that dare talk to me like this? Have you not heard of the greatness, the selfless service and the inspired hymns of Tirunavukkarasu? Do you not know how he floated on a stone on the sea and reached the shore? You talk like this, wearing the garb of a Saiva. Where do you live ? Who are you ? Tell me!"

Appar visibly moved, meekly replied : "I am that hapless humble person who was inflicted with a colic in order to redeem me from another religion".

Great indeed was the astonishment and joy of Appudi. He fell at the feet of Appar, along with his wife and children. (He had also named his sons Tirunavukkarasu I and Tirunavukkarasu - II and so on !) He prevailed upon Appar to stay for lunch and set about preparing a sumptuous feast for Appar and his followers. When it was ready, Appudi sent his son Tirunavukkarasu-I to go into the garden and cut and bring plaintain leaves on which to serve lunch for the guests. As the boy was cutting a leaf, a viper bit him from the plaintain shrub. The frightened boy, however, dutifully brought the leaves to his mother without telling her he was bitten by a serpent but fell down unconscious. The parents realised at once what had happened but, as they thought feeding the guests more important, they rolled up the body of the boy on a mat, kept it in a corner and suppressing their own grief hastened to look after the arrangements.

The leaves were spread in order, and the guests were seated against them, according to custom. Appar was at the head of the table. When grace was said, it was usual for the chief guest to distribute the Sacred Ash with his benediction to the members of the house. While distributing the Ash, Appar said, "Please call your first son also". Appudi, without the least hesitation, replied "Sir, he may not be fit now". He was only anxious that Appar should have his food; he never gave a thought to his son who lay probably dead. But Appar shrewdly surmised that something was wrong, and carefully got the truth from Appudi. Much moved by his devotion, Appar took the body of the boy before the sanctum of the local shrine, kept it outside the entrance to the gopura and there sang a hymn in praise of the Lord, beseeching rescue for the child from the snake's poison. As he finished the song the boy got up as though from deep slumber.

Then they all returned to their house and Appar, seating Appudi and all his sons by his side, finished his lunch. In due course, he took leave of Appudi and went on his tours, where, in the next shrine he worshipped at, he praised the devotion of Appudi in a song, Appudi continued in this service, always giving all praise and glory to Appar,

II

Those were days when caste restrictions were held to be very rigid; a brahmin could not bow before a lower caste member, much less take food with him. But we find that Appudi, a brahmin in the Tanjavur district, the citadel of orthodoxy, fell at the feet of Appar (a velala, considered to be an inferior caste), along with his wife and children, and dined with him.

Again, in the present day, public life in India has come to mean naked self-glorification. A public worker may not have done anything, but glorifying tablets are laid in his name for foundations, opening ceremonies etc. for schools, hospitals, bridges, temple renovations and the like. Wherever you turn, you find the name of some person glaring at you in the face, from a wall, pillar or parapet. All these may be built with public money but individuals are glorified and every one is indeed so complacent about it. In contrast to this, we find Appudi doing all his charitable services in the name of Saint Appar, whom he had not even seen but had learnt to revere. His whole life was one complete surrender to the name of Appar, in whom Appudi saw the manifestation of the Supreme.

Thus the life of Saint Appudi holds out the message of equality and love, humility and service, to the present day self glorifying and caste-ridden society.

25. SAINT TIRU NILANAKKAR

*"I am the servant of Tiru Nilanakkār of Sattamangal
girt by the roaring waters"*

The story of Saint Tiru Nilanakkār is calculated to bring home two truths - namely, that scriptural knowledge cannot take one near God while sincere love in the heart can, and that barriers of caste or class do not exist for the God-minded people. There are two incidents in his life which reveal these two aspects of the Truth.

Tiru Nilanakkar was born in a village named Sattamangai in Tanjavur district, in a brahmin family. From his early days he was trained in the worship of Lord Siva and also of His servants. He made it a habit to feed godly men daily. When he had grown up, he used to go to the temple with his wife and there worship Him. It so happened that one day, when he was saying his prayers in front of the shrine, a poisonous spider fell on the image of the Lord. His wife, who was standing by, saw this and was stunned. However, the next moment she rushed to the image and blew on it with her mouth, as though she would blow away the same spider had it fallen on her own child. Naturally, some spittle from her mouth could have fallen on the image. Her husband, who was sitting there witnessing all this, was very angry. For him, with all his erudition, this was an act of sacrilege. He cried, "You foolish woman, how dare you do this profane act ?" The poor woman explained simply that she did so to remove the poisonous spider.

Nilanakkar was not satisfied. He felt that his very worship that day was defiled by this irreligious act of his wife. "Woman, you have sinned by this act. I disown you from this moment". So saying, he finished his evening worship and returned home alone. But the good woman was sad at heart. She dared not return home to her husband. So she stayed in the temple, even after it was dark.

In the middle of the night, Nilanakkar in his home had a dream. Lord Siva enshrined in the temple appeared before him and when he saw the vision, he found that except the small surface where his wife had blown with her mouth, all the other parts of the Lord's person had eruptions from the poison of the spider. When the Lord showed him these, he was indeed awestruck and felt humbled. He woke up from his sleep, said his prayers, and as soon as it was dawn, hastened to the temple, bowed to the Lord in all humility and brought back his wife.

His scriptures had taught him that he should not blow on the person of the Lord's image lest his spittle should fall on it but this rule had no application to the good lady. She

was instinctively afraid that the spider's poison might do some harm and so she blew it off, as a mother would do to her child. Here was a case of spontaneous love and affection and so it was beyond the pale of scriptural rules. The Lord had made all this clear to Nilanakkar in his dream by showing him the eruptions.

Nilanakkar was thereafter leading a peaceful and devotional life for some time. The boy-saint Tiru Jnana-sambandhar was then visiting the temples in the neighbourhood and offering worship there. Nilanakkar had heard of the greatness of Sambandhar and of how God had manifested Himself to the little child and had made him sing divine songs at all the Siva shrines. He then went to the neighbouring village where Sambandhar was camping with his followers and invited him to visit his place. Sambandhar agreed and in due time came to Sattamangai. The whole village put on a festive appearance. Nilanakkar welcomed him and his followers in a fitting manner and organised a grand feast for the celebrated guest and his retinue.

Now there was a couple in Sambandhar's group who belonged to the so-called untouchable caste. We should remember this was the early seventh century A. C. Tiru Nilakanthap-panar and his wife were musicians, though of the lowest caste, and they accompanied Sambandhar on all his tours and rendered his songs on their yazh. Their instrumental music was very much liked by the Saint himself and the two were held in great esteem in the land. Of course they had also been fed and felicitated here by Nilanakkar along with the others without any distinction of caste.

Night came on. Arrangements were afoot for the stay of the Saint Sambandhar and his party in Nilanakkar's house for the night. But Sambandhar was anxious. Nilanakkar he knew, was a godly man, but those were days when caste restrictions were very rigid. Nilanakkar was living in the brahmin quarters, the citadel of orthodoxy and perhaps Sambandhar, impulsive and young, was not quite sure how

Nilanakkar would react to the low caste of Nilakanthar. So he called him aside and told him to provide suitable accommodation to Nilakanthar and his wife. We should remember that Sambandhar did not ask for any special arrangements for himself or for any other members of his party.

Nilanakkar we may be sure, would have felt a little offended. "Why should Sambandhar single out Tiru Nilakanthar and remind me of proper accommodation for him? Surely he should have known that I am sufficiently advanced in God's service to discriminate on the question of caste among God's men." Nilanakkar's thoughts would have run on these lines, although Sekkilar does not say them. He took Nilakanthar and his wife to the central part of his house which housed the altar and provided there the necessary accommodation for the couple for the night. The historian tells us that, pleased at this act of Nilanakkar, the ceremonial fire (Agni) kept at the altar, itself burned more brightly.

The altar in a brahmin's house is the inner sanctum held most sacred. That Nilanakkar housed an untouchable couple near the altar is a great tribute to his spiritual advancement which was able to perceive all God's men as brothers. Needless to say, Sambandhar was very much pleased and when he next sang in the temple, he referred to Nilanakkar and his worship in his songs.

The story of Nilanakkar thus illustrates the truths that love is most important in the worship of the Lord and that before God all men are equal.

Later on we learn that Nilanakkar was invited to officiate as priest at the wedding of Sambandhar. When the ceremonies were over, a huge divine effulgence lit up the shrine and Nilanakkar along with Sambandhar and his bride also entered the bright Light into Eternal Bliss.

26. SAINT NAMINANDI

*" I am the servant of the servants of the rare great person
Naminandi "*

Tiru Arur is one of the most ancient cities and shrines of Tamil Nad. Legends say that it was also one of the capital cities of the early Chola emperors, in the last centuries B. C. Any number of legends and stories of miracles abound about that city. One such story is that of Saint Naminandi.

Naminandi was born in a Saiva brahmin family in the village of Emap-perur, a few miles from Arur. He used to go often to Arur and worship Siva in the shrine there. As he was coming out of the temple one evening, he found darkness fast setting in and so he desired to light some lamps in the temple. Lighting the lamps with cow's ghee instead of the usual oil was considered more meritorious. But there was no time for him to go to his village and return with ghee. So he thought of borrowing some ghee from the neighbouring houses and asked the householders for a little ghee. They happened to be unsympathetic Jains and so they taunted him saying : "Your God dances with fire in His hand. So no lamps are necessary for Him. Why don't you light your lamps with water?"

Naminandi was stung by these cruel words and took his complaint to the Lord in the temple. The Lord advised him not to worry, but to light the lamps with water. Naminandi could scarcely believe his ears but he did as he was bid. Uttering God's name, he took some water from the temple tank, filled the lamps with it and lit them. The lamps burned brighter than before and the entire city marvelled at the devotion of Naminandi, which had worked such a miracle. In a short time the Jains of the place were driven away from the city by the king for the disrespect they showed to another saint, blind Dandi and Naminandi was appointed to supervise the administration of the temple. This our saint did well and he instituted some new festivals also in the temple.

Naminandi we said was a brahmin and perhaps a trace of caste distinction was lurking in him in spite of his spirituality and deep piety. An incident now happened which opened his eyes. An image of the Lord used to be taken from Tiru Arur to the neighbouring village of Manali, for a picnic as it were, and now under Naminandi's supervision the festival passed off well. People took part in it with out any reservation of caste or clan. When he returned home after the festival, he did not enter his house but stayed out and slept in the yard outside.

His wife came and asked him, "Why don't you come in and perform your puja as usual?" The man in a totally befuddled frame of mind, replied : "When I went to Manali for the festival, I mixed with all sorts of people and so got polluted. Hence please have some fresh water ready, so that I can wash off my pollution with a bath and then get in",

When she had gone for a few minutes to prepare water for his bath, Naminandi had a short nap. He had a vision of the Lord who drew his attention to the fact that all those that were born at Arur were Siva's retinue and that they had no caste. Naminandi woke up trembling that he had so foolishly considered himself defiled, narrated the vision to his wife, got into his house and performed his puja in the usual manner.

The next morning he returned to Tiru Arur and his chastened vision saw all the people there as Sivabhaktas, members of Siva's retinue. He shifted his home to Arur and lived there a long time doing service to the devotees of Siva.

Naminandi is a historical figure and the miracle that happened in his life is referred to by the saints Appar and Sambandhar. Apart from that miracle, the Manali incident in his life shows that even the best and most advanced among us may frequently fall a victim to age-old prejudice and that it requires the Hand of God to lift us from the mire of superstition and prejudice.

27. SAINT TIRU JNANA SAMBANDHAR

*“I am the servant of the servants of our Lord, Sambandhar,
who glorifies the feet of none but He with honey laden
cassia flowers emitting fresh fragrance, on which bees hum.”*

I

Childhood has always had a great attraction for religion. The Divine Presence has visited many little children and they have blossomed into Sainthood in infancy. Such a saint was Tiru Jnana-Sambandhar of the early seventh century. We have mentioned earlier that Jnana Sambandhar was a junior contemporary of Saint Appar.

Sambandhar was born of brahmin parents in Sikali, a small town in Tanjavur district. His father Sivapada-hrdayar had prayed for a son who could rid the land of alien influences. His prayers were answered and in due time Sambandhar was born. One day when the boy was about three years, his father carried him to the temple tank and placing him on the top of the steps went down into the water for a dip in the early morning. Not finding his father, who had immersed himself in the water, the child turned to the temple and cried, “Oh Mother, oh Father !” The Heavenly Father thereupon appeared before the child along with his consort Sakti, and bade Her give the child a little of her breast milk in a golden cup. She took the milk in a golden cup and gave it to the child. The milk was the symbol of Divine Grace descending upon the child, who immediately became endowed with Divine Wisdom.

Coming out of the water the father saw a trickle of milk from a corner of the child’s mouth and imagining that the child had been polluted by a feed of milk from some unknown person, he brandished a stick and asked the child who fed him. Immediately the child burst into a divine song pointing out to the heavens, from where the Heavenly Father appeared before him. The child’s father and the entire village were considerably wonderstruck. They all went in to the temple with

the child and worshipped there. From then onwards the child came to be known as Saint Tiru Jnana Sambandhar, "One endowed with Divine Wisdom".

Sambandhar from the age of three till his last day at the age of sixteen, was constantly touring the entire Tamil country from Cape Comorin in the south to Kalahasti (Chittoor district) in the north, visiting all the important shrines and singing melodious songs in the Divine Presence. Large numbers of devotees gathered round him and it was always a very large troupe that was on the move. Since Sambandhar was fed with Divine Milk, legend called him a real Son of God, and this relationship always existed for him to the end. He received a pair of golden cymbals at nearby Tirukkolakka for marking time, to relieve the pain on his palms when marking time. In another place, he received a pearl palanquin for riding, so that he might not get tired with-walking. Divine insignia like the ceremonial umbrella, trumpets and so on were given to him in another place. A pearl and golden canopy was conferred on him at Pattisvaram, all by Divine will. With these elaborate and royal regalia and a large retinue of devotees, he travelled to several places singing the glory of God and preaching the message of surrender to the Divine Will.

Sekkilar, the Saiva historian of the twelfth century, records in beautiful language and moving terms, the meeting between this child Saint and the older Saint Appar. The passages are some of the most picturesque and soul stirring verses in the language.

The life of Sambandhar thereafter is one long string of pilgrimages and miracles. Being an young boy, his youth and enthusiasm always go out to help afflicted people, under Divine command. In a place near Tiru Chirappalli called Tirup-Pachilachiramam his song cured the young daughter of the local chieftain of a most painful disease called *muyalakan*, which was afflicting her for some time. Again, in the region of Tiruchengunrur his retinue was afflicted with a dangerous infectious fever during the winter season, because

of the unfamiliar cold. He sang in praise of the Lord, who had swallowed, in order to protect all life, the legendary poison which was out to destroy all the celestials and the demons. The spell of fever subsided and did not affect, not only his followers, but all the other people too.

His father once wanted money for performing a special sacrifice. Sambandhar prayed to the Lord at Tiru Avaduturai and received a purse of gold. This he presented to his father enjoining him to perform a sacrifice for fostering good and ridding the world of evil. In another place he heard the anguished cries of a young girl whose fiance had died just then of snake bite. His songs brought him back to life and restored the young man to his lady-love. He got them married there and then sent them away. In many places nearby he was the guest of honour with several Saints, one of whom is Saint Siruttondar, a historical figure, having been in his early years Commander of the army under Narasimha Pallava, Emperor of Kanchipuram (630).

Next follows a short period of struggle with Jainism in the life of Sambandhar. The Pandiya King of Madurai had embraced Jainism. All the people including the King had forsworn their ancient Saiva religion. Very much chagrined at this, the Madurai Queen, who was a Chola Princess, and her Saiva Minister, both of whom had remained followers of Siva, sent messengers to meet Sambandhar and invite him to Madurai for combating Jainism and restoring Saivism. These met Sambandhar in the company of Saint Appar. Appar had suffered terribly from Jain persecution in his early life and was now an old man. Naturally he was very much concerned for the harm that the Jains might do to an young boy like Sambandhar. He tried to dissuade him from going to Madurai saying that the moment was inopportune and that the stars were inauspicious. In his characteristic youthful fashion, Sambandhar said that "once you are in God's hands, all stars are auspicious and all moments are opportune."

His activities at Madurai in support of Saivism are an epic in themselves. We must remember here that although

Sambandhar's words and action were impulsive and full of youthful vigour, he never for a moment failed to realise the Divine Presence nor did he set out to do anything without ascertaining the Divine Will.

He met the Queen and comforted her when she was afraid that, as he was only a child, he might come to harm at the hands of the opponents who were large in number and aged people. A fire which the miscreants set to the camp of Sambandhar was directed by him to seize the king himself in a mild form and it took the form of a fever. The Jains were unable to cure the king's fever. The young saint was invited to see the king and cure him. Here he entered into a contest of three rounds with the Jains. The first was curing the king's fever. A song from him extolling Siva's sacred ash, and a touch on the king's fever-racked body with the sacred ash, immediately brought him to normal. Not only that; the moment Sambandhar set his eyes on the king, he was mentally won over and converted.

The second round was a trial of strength through fire. All the holy scriptures which the Jains placed on the fire were burnt to ashes, while a song from Sambandhar penned on a palm leaf, remained unburnt, fresh and green.

The third round was on the waters of the River Vaihai. The religious texts placed on the waters by the Jains were washed away by the river, while a leaf with a song from Sambandhar was floating, tearing the waters and riding against the current. Great was the wonder of the king and the citizens. The persecutors were thoroughly discomfited. Some impaled themselves and most re-embraced Saivism, as they had themselves vowed.

Many other similar miracles happened, including the rowing of a boat carrying the Saint and his retinue across a river in full floods, without a ferryman or oars. In a place near modern Madras, where all the palmyrah trees planted by a Saiva devotee turned out to be male trees, to the ridicule and derision from heretics, Sambandhar by a song in praise of the

Deity in the local shrine turned them all into fruit-bearing female trees. In present Madras (there was no Madras then) he went to the Mayilappur temple. A *valsya* devotee had dedicated his daughter to Sambandhar but the girl unfortunately had died of snake bite as a child. He had cremated her body and preserved her bones in an earthen urn in the hope of presenting these to Sambandhar, whenever he happened to go there. This man now brought the urn before Sambandhar and told him the story of his daughter. Thereupon Sambandhar sang a song in praise of the Lord of Mayilappur and prayed that the girl be brought back to life. The girl rose up from the urn as a beautiful damsel before Sambandhar and the assembled people. He treated her as his adopted daughter and left her with her father and in due time reached his home Sikali.

The young boy was now sixteen, and, as was the custom then, arrangements for his marriage were afoot. A bride was selected at Nallurp-perumanam about 6 miles from his place, and the marriage was performed at an auspicious moment, Claspings the hand of his bride, Sambandhar came to the Nallur temple. He sang a song expressing his disinclination to lead a worldly life. A huge effulgence lit up the shrine. Sambandhar prayed that he might be taken back to the feet of his Lord. He sang a song in praise of the Lord's name, enjoined all the people to enter the bright Light, and himself entered it last with his bride. Thus his life ended by a merger with the Universal Self.

Such is the story of Saint Tiru Jnana Sambandhar, the boy Saint if we may call him so. 4, 158 verses of his 384 songs are available today. For wonderful imagery of nature, tilt of words, felicity of expression, cadence and rhythm, and challenge and boldness of utterance along with surrender to the Supreme Will, he has no parallel in the language. He has sung these songs as a boy and the spirit of youth pervades every one of his lines. There is no doubt that he considered himself the Son of God and the utterances are quite fitting for such a son. It is no exaggeration to say that this single boy Saint and Poet has influenced and moulded the entire poetry, religious observance

and spiritual life of the people of this country as no other poet or Saint has done,

II

Saiva religious tradition likens Sambandhar to the Son of God. The several miracles which had happened in his life lend support to this view. Divine Wisdom was bestowed upon him at the early age of three. During his short life of sixteen years, he was ever under the divine protection. Saints are generally made to pass through several severe ordeals in life, calculated to test and show to the people at large their egoless surrender and their absolute faith in the Higher Being. We do not see any such ordeal or suffering in the life of Sambandhar. Rather, we find Divine intervention, even out of the way, to safeguard this young child against physical or material discomfort. The provision of a pair of cymbals, a canopy, a palanquin, royal insignia and the like are but a few instances to prove this.

Being a child, Sambandhar could not but feel for the suffering and the afflicted humanity. We have seen how he intervened to dispel a wave of cold and fever which his followers were unable to bear in the hilly tracts. As mentioned earlier, he had cured a princess of a dangerous ailment, and brought back to life a young merchant for the sake of his lady-love. He had made male palmyrah trees bear fruit, as prayed for by a devotee. He had restored to life a young damsel from her ashes preserved by her devoted father. At the intervention of the Queen and the Prime Minister of the Pandiya Country, he had restored religion and worship in the land. There are yet more such instances.

With the greatest ease and assurance he appeals to God to come to the aid of individuals and groups and perform miracles so that the immanence and grace of the Transcendental Being could be made manifest to devout souls who genuinely supplicated themselves to the divine dispensation. True to the legendary nature of the Son of God, he prays to the Lord not from a distance, not with the submission of a servant, but with a sense of his own right as those of a son in relation to his father. His utterances are

always bold and commanding which, in a person of more advanced age, will easily be mistaken for naked egotism. When Saint Appar, his much elder contemporary, dissuaded him from going to the Pandiya Kingdom at the invitation of the Queen, pointing out the inauspicious position of the celestial bodies at the time and the harm that might be done to him by the powerful Jains there, Sambandhar sang a song simply brushing aside all the remonstrances, with the words : "Lord Siva dwells in our heart. The celestial bodies are powerless to harm us. Evil powers, wild animals, the forces of Death and the like cannot worry us. On our word, we say that those who sing these few lines will even reign over the Heavens !"

Un-understanding and unsympathetic critics have said that similar words of Sambandhar were uttered out of boyish conceit. This is wholly beside the mark. Sambandhar, boy though he be, was living in the immediate presence of the Lord every moment of his life and was able to say with truth and conviction that the words coming out his mouth in the form of song were not merely his words, but the Lord's.

We should also remember here that his conscious mind always registered a total surrender to the Divine Will and he did not embark on any enterprise without first obtaining Divine approval therefor. When he went to Madurai for re-establishing Saivism there, he first went to the temple to obtain the Lord's benediction on his proposed battle with the Jain priests.

Sambandhar had sung thousands of songs in praise of the Lord, of which 383 songs with 4147 verses were available in the 11th century when the Saiva Canonical Books were compiled. A further poem of 11 songs was found a thousand years back inscribed in a temple in Tanjavur district. This shows the popularity of his songs which were being regularly sung in the temples. His songs were collected along with the others and they form the first three Books of the group of twelve Saiva Canonical Texts.

Sambandhar was always very human and very practical, with a high sense of humour, remarkable in a young boy in his early teens. When his followers grumbled that the gold given to him by God at Vizhi-mizhalai, to tide over a period of famine, was inferior to that given to Saint Appar, he had the humility and the sense of humour to say that Appar deserved to have better gold because he did manual labour in the temple, which he himself did not.

His youthful pride was tickled when the kinsmen of his yazh accompanist, Tiru Nilakanthar, said that the popularity of his songs was due largely to the instrument. He sang the next song in a manner which Nilakanthar was unable to follow on the instrument. Nilakanthar thereupon felt remorse for having entertained a false conceit, that this instrument could be equal or superior to Sambandhar's divine song and was about to smash his instrument, which was the cause of all this conceit. Sambandhar intervened saying : "Friend, please tarry. The instrument is man-made while the human frame which sings is God-made. How can the man-made organ compete successfully with the God-made one ? "

The young Pandiya Queen met Sambandhar in the temple, care and anxiety were writ large on her face, "How can this lone little child engage in a dialectical warfare with the hordes of veteran priests of the King ? " Sambandhar read this thought and his reply is characteristic : "My dear lady, Queen of the Pandiyas, please do not be anxious of the outcome, because of my tender years. The Lord of Madurai dwells in me. He will not let me down before these sinners".

A remarkable feature of the life of Sambandhar is the end itself. When a huge effulgence lit up the shrine in answer to his prayers and a path of light was also blazened therein, he enjoined all those near and dear to him and also those assembled for his wedding function, to pass into the Light. All people passed in and lastly he also passed in, clasping the hand of his bride and disappeared into the Universal Light. As in life, so also in the end, he invoked divine benediction on all around him.

Sambandhar started a movement in the Tamil country which was both literary and religious. He always calls himself a Tamil Saint and it was from his day that the Tamil language began to assert itself in religious and ceremonial matters. Again, Sambandhar was a master of melody and a great scholar too. His songs are the most powerful when set to tune and he has sung more tunes and variations than all the other hymn singers. He had recaptured for the people their native music which seemed to have been lost. Alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, the conscious inter-play of liquids and vowels, repetition - all these are hand-maids to his muse. The nature of his compositions, their variety and volume easily declare that he was more than an inspired poet. There is none in the whole range of Tamil poets to portray in melodious ripples the intoxicating revelry of the abundance of nature, the beauteous forms in the animal and the human kingdoms and the ceremonials we see around, so much so that he is even called a nature poet.

III

The emblems of Siva to be scrupulously worshipped by the devotees have great significance in the lives of the saints. The emblems are the three - the Rudraksha beads worn on the body, the Sacred Ash smeared on the body, particularly the forehead and the Siva mantra, the Panchakshara, uttered by the tongue. The rudraksha beads are mentioned in a few places by Sambandhar. But the sacred ash occupies a unique place.

Just as Tilakavati used the Lord's Holy Ash to remove the suffering of Appar and re-admit him into the Saiva fold, we find here that Tiru Jnana Sambandhar utilises the Holy Ash as the great panacea for many ills, particularly for curing the fever of the Pandiya king. He has on that occasion sung a poem glorifying the great virtue of the Holy Ash in the life of a Siva bhakta. Among all the singers he is the only one to have sung a poem on the Ash itself.

The lives of the saints summarised here give an account of a large number of Saints who had given up their lives in

order to uphold the unique position given to the sacred ash in the Saiva religion.

The third emblem is the *panchakshara mantra* which is both the name of the Lord as well as the Supreme Mystic Mantra, an incantation of which enables man to free himself from the cycle of births and deaths. Both Appar and Sundarar have sung a fine poem each on this mantra but it is most significant that Thiru Jnana Sambandhar has sung two poems on the Panchakshara.

The name of the Lord Siva, the Panchakshara mantra, is the most beloved one in all Saivism. When he was seven, the brahmins of the place invested him with the sacred thread to indicate his status as the twice-born and taught him the vedic mantra (the *Gayatri mantra*). But he listened to all their mantras and then dispelled the many doubts arising out of their study of their mantras and then sang the song on the *Panchakshara* as though he were teaching them the truth that the five syllables of Siva were the origin for all mantras. Here he taught them that this mantra constituted the four vedas, and the mantra inherent in the fire rituals of the brahmins. The whole song of the usual eleven verses glorifies the Siva-Panchakshara. Lastly when he was entering the Divine Effulgence at the Nallurp-perumanam temple on the occasion of his wedding, he sang again another song on the *Panchakshara* glorifying its efficacy. This action of his is most significant. His initiation into brahminhood commences with one Panchakshara song and his departure from this life is with another Panchakshara song.

The panchakshara song sung by him at the time of entering the Effulgence at Nallurp-perumanam has a special religious significance. When he directs all people assembled there to enter the Effulgence, the question of competence for the individuals arises. How can all and sundry be given *mukti* by Sambandhar instantaneously? The answer is that his utterance of the special *Panchakshara* song was the *diksha*, the *vaceka diksha*, for all the people. By this diksha he conferred initiation on the people and qualified them for *mukti*.

The message of these two for the Saivas in general and for the brahmin in particular is that the *Panchakshara mantra* is the beginning and the end of everything. But this community, enamoured of the philosophy of a later day, has cast to the winds the *Upadesa* of the earlier brahmin saint.

Sambandhar, the son of God, is considered to typify in his life the *kriya* path, otherwise known as the *Satputra* marga. But yet he can be seen to lay considerable emphasis on the path of *charya* or bodily service. "Let us make flower gardens, and many water tanks and with a loving heart gather the flowers and worship His Feet". "Oh my heart, bear this in mind : who knows how long we may live and when our end may come? Let us therefore have the good fortune to carry flowers on our heads, to listen to the utterance of the names, of the Lord enshrined in Tiru Saykkadu" and let our tongues also utter His names. "The soul is afflicted with two kinds of ills - *one* those resulting from the *mulas* or bonds - that attach themselves to it and *two* - those that are caused by the soul itself. The Lord Siva helps the souls by removing both these kinds of ills. Let us therefore go to Him at Mudukunru and worship Him".

The Lord Siva dwells, says Sambandhar, in the hearts of those who are absolutely devoted to Him and have conquered worldly desires and temptation and have prepared in their hearts a path for the entry of Divine Wisdom. What is His Form ? He is the five forms of primordial matter, the beginning and the end, He is the four corners of the world, He is all the melody, the five senses, all the worlds, all thought and volition, the objects of these, all forms, and things formless ; He is transcendant and yet immanent. Sambandhar, though yet a boy, sings : "Oh my heart, your parents have all gone. Death is just biding time. You have also to go. When are you planning to live ? Oh you fool, do not be afraid. Go and worship at Arur. You will be saved."

"My heart, you have indeed done meritorious deeds in the past. For, you have now the rare good fortune to go and worship the Lord at Tiru Valanchuli, sing His praises and dance in ecstasy."

"The grace of the Lord does not have any preferences. One may be born anywhere, as anything (not necessarily as a human being). But if one is simply aware of the presence of God and regulates one's life accordingly, God immediately showers His mercy on one, 'then and there.'" "Do not begin expounding. The ways in which grace is bestowed on the deserving, and the greatness of God, are limitless. Hence if you desire to be free from Karma and from any predestined end, bow at the feet of the Lord and pray for His Grace. "You cannot try to comprehend Him with all the intricacies of your logic and reasoning. If you desire to overcome suffering on earth, have faith and go to His Feet."

Such in brief is the teaching of Saint Tiru Jnana Sambandhar who reached at a very tender age the final beatitude, along with those around him.

28. EYAR KONE KALIKKAMAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Eyar Kone Kalikkamar".

Devotion to God sometimes places the bhakta concerned in a state of high emotional tension. This reacts in totally unexpected ways. There are several such emotional people among the saints who are violently intolerant of the 'weakness' of godly men, even when God Himself winks at such weakness. Kalikkamar was one such intolerant lover of God.

He was born in Perumangalam in the Chola country in the Eyar (velalar) clan and so was called Eyar Kone (the lord of the *eyar* clan). He was a captain in the Chola army. Several incidents in his life have been narrated both in the *Periya puranam* and in the hymns of Sundarar showing his great devotion to Siva. Elders had arranged for his marriage with the daughter of Manakkanjalar and so he left for his place along with his friends and relatives. Arriving there he found that the tuft of hair of the bride elect had been cut off by her father for providing a sacred thread of hair for a Siva

bhakta. He was not the least chagrined over the incident; he only said, "I had not the good fortune to witness the incident," and straightway married her and took her to his place. In due time, her tuft grew as usual. (Vide section 11.)

Tirup - Punkur is a famous shrine a mile from Kalikkamar's place. The early story of Nandanar was enacted in this place. Kalikkamar had performed many acts of service to this shrine. Once, there was no rain in the area. All the crops withered and there was the threat of famine. At that time, Kalikkamar prayed to the Lord of Tirup - Punkur for rains and said that he would donate six *velis* (40 acres) of land to the temple in order that his prayers might be answered. Rains came on and they came in such heavy torrents that the entire area was submerged in water and yet the rains would not stop. Again Kalikkamar prayed to the Lord and donated a further extent of six *velis* for stopping the rains and then the floods ceased. This rare incident is celebrated in a song by Saint Sundarar.

Such was the devotion of Kalikkamar. Now he learnt that St. Sundarar had sent Tyagaraja, the Lord of Tiru Arur, several times at dead of night to the house of his wife Paravai, as a messenger of love, when she had refused to admit Sundarar or see him. He was naturally very angry. That a man, calling himself a servant of God, should dare to send God as a messenger of love, even though He was willing to go, was something he could not tolerate. He spoke very contemptuously against Sundarar, "I cannot say what may happen if I see him!" cried he.

Sundarar learnt of the attitude of Kalikkamar. He prayed to Lord Tyagaraja to pacify him. Siva, in His infinite mercy, planned to make the two, friends. He caused a severe colic to afflict Kalikkamar. Unable to bear the pain, Kalikkamar prayed to God to help him. Siva appeared before him and told him that the colic could be cared only by Sundarar. Kalikkamar was still more adamant: "I had been Your servant through generations. But Sundarar has become your servant only now. If I can get cured only by him, I choose to suffer and do not want his cure" answered he.

But Siva directed Sundarar to proceed to Kalikkamar's place and cure his ailment. Gladly he started and sent word to Kalikkamar. "If he who utilised Siva as a messenger is to go to me for curing my ailment, I shall rather die before he comes to me" said he, and tore up his bowels with his dagger. By that time Sundarar had reached that place. Kalikkamar's wife asked the people around not to cry for what her husband had done, and sent them to welcome him. Then Sundarar went in and saw what had happened. "If this be so, I shall also give up my life" said he, and seized Kalikkamar's dagger. Through God's grace, Kalikkamar came to life and wrested the dagger from Sundarar's hand. Sundarar fell at his feet and the two became friends.

Both of them worshipped at Tirup-Punkur and later went and worshipped at Tiru Arur also. In due course Kalikkamar returned to his place, and continuing in his service to Siva attained final beatitude.

29. SAINT TIRU MULAR

"I am the servant of the servants of our Lord Tiru Mular."

Tirumular occupies a unique place in the history of South Indian Saivism and of its literature. His songs, numbering over 3,000 verses have been collected as Book X of the Twelve Sacred Hymn Books of the Tamils. The very name of his songs, known as the Holy MANTRAS (Divine Incantations) reveal the great value attached to them by the Saiva community.

The story of Tirumular is partially clothed in legend. But the legend itself is a manifestation of the philosophy expounded by him. Himself a highly evolved soul, he was passing through the more important places of pilgrimage in India, on his way to the Podiyil hill, the abode of Sage Agastyar. He had visited the important shrines on the

Himalayas including those in Nepal. Then he visited the shrines in Tondainadu and other areas including Tillai. He finally decided to settle down for tapas (penance) on the banks of the river Kaveri, at a place called Tiru Avaduturai, a village in Tanjavur District.

There he saw a herd of cattle, bellowing in great distress and grief over the body of its kind master and cowherd, who had just then died while tending the herd. The pilgrim was much moved by the feeling and distress of the dumb animals and to satisfy them, he left his own body in a safe place and, through his own superhuman powers (*siddhi*) migrated, so says the legend, into that of the dead man, who was known as Mulan. Mulan came back to life. The herd was immediately happy and he followed them into their grazing lands and to the water front of the Kaveri where they quenched their thirst. As it was already dark, as a matter of routine they returned home, frisking and frolicking and reached their own respective pens. He went with them but did not return home. His wife wondered at his lateness and came to him to invite him home. But the new Mulan (or Tirumular, Divine Mular, as we shall now call him) would have no truck with her or with the world either. She left him in despair and told her people. When her people saw his condition they realized that he was in Sivayoga and took her away. Tirumular returned to the pastures following the path of the cows to find his own original body but could not find it. Through his superior *jnana* he understood that this was a gracious work of Siva, to make him spread the *agama* knowledge through the Tamil language. Then he went to the Tiru Avaduturai temple and sat there in meditation for years and opened his eyes once a year to write down in song a thought which had come to him in the course of the year. Thus he wrote 3,000 songs, each song arising out of his rich inner mystic experience of the Cosmic Self, till the time of his final union with the Lord, on a day in October-November.

Tirumular is said to have lived for 3000 years, putting down his spiritual experience of one year in one verse. We may take this to be a figurative way of saying that each verse

contains the spiritual experience that could accrue through a period of one year ; it is not necessary that the writer should have lived through a whole year to have the experiences in one verse. He could have had the experiences in succession, quickly, in a much shorter span of time.

II

Leaving off the legend part of the story, we know that Tirumular actually lived in the present Tanjavur district in the fifth century A. C. Some of the most mystic utterances and most sublime experiences find expression in his songs. We may safely assert that his utterances laid the foundation for a distinctive system of philosophy and a characteristic practice of religion which came later to be called the Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy and which is very much alive today, governing the life and conduct of more than forty million Tamilians here and elsewhere.

He laid the seed of Saivism in the hearts of the people which grew up into a fragrant and resplendent bloom in the next few centuries, resulting in the evolution of a host of God-inspired Saivite bards and saints and in the erecting of thousands of temples of God and monuments of artistic beauty, in the whole of South India.

The teachings of Tirumular can be summarised in the single word LOVE. "Let me share my blissful experiences with the world", says he. "The ignorant say that Love and Siva (God) are different. They do not know that Love is God. If they know, then this life will be one of ceaseless LOVE." Tirumular here is not different from Gandhi, who preached that Truth is God. Like the two sides of the coin, Love and Truth are the two aspects of the same Being and Tirumular and Gandhi each emphasized one aspect thereof.

"Give, Give, Give. Do not discriminate. Feed the poor. Do not amass property. Look at the crow, which calls its entire flock when there is any morsel available."

“God is ONE and all life is ONE. The Beyond is immaterial. Do you strive to live the Life Eternal, here, in the Present.”

*“Life on earth is so easy and so simple,
and is within the reach of any one ;
Just a petal to worship the Lord with ;
Just a blade of grass to feed the cow with ;
A morsel of food to the hungry,
and a kind word to the afflicted —
Who cannot afford these ?”*

While uttering sublime truths and expressing the richest of his own ecstatic experiences and trying to enliven the most anguished hearts, Tirumular is at the same time giving out the most practical philosophy of life for every one. Though he is considered the most mystic yogi in all Saivism, yet he is the most practical philosopher whom we can follow.

“Formerly had I thought the physical body is some thing to be shunned. But within it I see the glow of the Lord. Hence now I cherish it as the seat of Him. If the body perishes, the soul also goes. Then there is no question of bliss or salvation. Hence, know how to cherish the body well and cherish it. It will in turn cherish the Soul.”

Verily a strange statement indeed from a yogi who is supposed to teach you to flee this life ! So vastly different from all other teachers who tell you it is a sin to cherish this frail frame !

Tirumular lived in a period when the Jains had influenced thinking in parts of Tamilnadu and they had preached the transience of life, of this body, youthhood, and riches. Against this background he enumerates a new philosophy that this God-given body is not to be thrown away but is to be cherished both as the abode of God and as the means for one's own salvation. The theory of *karma* holds a central place in Hindu thinking, and *karma* is to be reduced to nought before one becomes fit for *mukti*. The soul in the

kevala stage (ie. unattached to the organs) cannot experience karma and so the body is absolutely essential for the working out of one's own karma. Thus Tiru Mular's dictum becomes the most important and positive philosophy for Saivism (and also for all Hinduism),

In his contempt for the littleness of the things of this world, he by far surpasses the profoundest ascetics and cynics. To give an example : "Life is transient", he says : "Look ! The couple ate their food and entered the bridal chamber. The groom complained of a little pain on his left (the heart). He laid himself down to rest and alas, rested for ever !"

But this is not the best of his own natural self. It is of a more heartening and exhilarating type :

*"Oh Friend, thou art thy foe
as well as they own friend,
Thou maketh this iife
and the one beyond.
Thou art the creator
of the fruits of thy actions,
Thou art the enjoyer thereof, and
Thou art the master of thy own destiny "*

*"There is only one God for the universe
That is the Life and the Soul
of the Universe That is Siva;
Just taste it,
Oh, it will be ever so sweet !"*

In Tirumular, the Tamil race has produced a marvellous combination of the deepest religious ecstasy and the most simple and practical way of life: To extend Love to all Life, to see God in all Life, and to achieve harmonious Union with It.

Some may call Tiru Mular obscure. True. His obscurity arises from many factors : A supremely classical language and diction at the same time, adoption of the language as it

was uttered by the people in his day, use of Sanskrit words and phrases as they came to him because of his profound scholarship in that language, and lastly an attempt to communicate the incommunicable yogic truths to the people around. In spite of all these, we see the golden thread of Love and Truth, Simplicity and Surrender, Humility and Dedication to humanity, connecting various the complex elements in this philosophy.

30. SAINT DANDI, THE BLIND SAINT

"I am the servant of Dandi of great perception."

Darkness co-exists with light. So also malefactors co-exist with public benefactors, in all ages and in all communities. Encroachment on public places is the rule in India today. Public roads, parks, temple grounds and tanks are encroached upon by private houses nearby and the public areas gradually dwindle in extent and, in course of time, fall into disuse and later on cease to exist. Dandi was a man who fought in the name of God against this offence against society.

Dandi was born blind in Tiru Arur, one of the most ancient cities of South India which was also sometime capital of the Chola rulers. His blindness gave him no frustration or unhappiness but gave him positive joy in the inward meditation of God and His grace. He thought that the function of eyesight was to be of real service to God and so, even without sight, he planned to serve Him. He always kept uttering the name of the Lord, the five syllabled mantra,

West of the large Siva temple is the famous temple tank, *Kamalalayam*, a very large tank, covering an extent of 35 acres. It so happened that in the days of Dandi the Jains had occupied the banks of the tank and had begun to erect buildings on the margin by encroaching upon the tank and

filling it up. The tank was gradually shrinking in extent. Dandi came to know of this and he decided to remove the encroachments and remove the foreign matter by digging in. He was blind and, to guide him in the work of excavation, he drove some pegs and poles from the bed of the tank from which earth had to be removed, to the spot on the bank where that earth was to be deposited, and tied a stout rope along the poles to guide his groping hands from the tank. He began excavation and continued his work with a spade and a basket, with the rope to guide him. All the while, he was chanting within himself the five syllables of the Lord's mantra.

When he was thus engaged, the encroaching Jains came to him one day and told him, "Friend, your digging will involve the death of many insects and tiny living beings, like the earthworm. Please therefore desist." He replied that his work was in the name of God and no harm would come of it. They taunted him saying: "You do not heed our *dharma*; you appear to have lost not only your eyes, but your ears as well!" He retorted: "You have dull wits, blind eyes, and deaf ears. What will you do if I regain my vision?" They replied, "If your God gives you back your vision, then certainly we shall run away from this city." Saying so, they entered the tank, snatched his spade and basket, plucked away the poles and pegs and rope, and left the blind man alone in the bed of the tank.

Very much distressed at the behaviour of the Jains, Dandi represented the matter in a prayer to the Lord in the temple and went home, with a sorrowful heart. He dreamt that night that the Lord promised to restore his sight and dispel all his anxiety about the tank. The King of the city also had a dream, in which he was asked by God to go and help Dandi in his efforts to restore the tank.

Very much astonished at the dream he had, the king sought out Dandi in the morning and came to know of his plight. Dandi explained to him how the Jains prevented him from doing his work and how they railed at him for his blindness. The king called them and made an enquiry. They

agreed to flee the city if a miracle happened and Dandi's vision were restored. It was now upto the poor blind man to bring about such a miracle. Humble and meek as ever, Dandi prayed to the Lord to restore his sight and bathed in the tank, all the while chanting God's name. He rose up with his sight restored miraculously! Simultaneously the Jains who taunted him lost their vision. Every one was amazed. The king was wonderstruck at the devotion and simplicity of Dandi, as also at the Mercy shown him by God. According to promise, he drove all the miscreants from the country. He had the tank extended with his own men to its full and original size and also restored its banks on all the sides. Then he bowed at Dandi's feet and left.

Dandi continued in the service of the Lord humble and happy as ever chanting the Lord's name and in the fulness of time was gathered unto His feet.

Dandi, though a blind man (date earlier than the 7th century) was not content to think along with John Milton that "they also serve who only stand and wait," but had the courage to carve out a course of action for himself in His service.

31. SAINT MURKKAR

"I am the servant of Murkkar"

The story of Murkka Nayanar is in a class by itself. The scriptures of all religions say that gambling is a sin. But here we find one who made gambling his profession and thereby attained *mukti*. His very name is some thing repugnant to our sense of godliness - Murkkar means the Fierce.

Murkkar was born in a rustic farmer's family in the village of Tiru Velkadu near Madras. He was a pious man, devoted to the holy ash as a symbol of Lord Siva. He made it a principle in his daily life to feed a few devotees of Siva every

day before he himself sat down to lunch. This principle he was following for a long time. Daily he got together a few godly men and gave them sumptuous food and money. As the number of indigent devotees grew larger and larger, Murkkar had to sell away all his property for feeding them and he became very poor indeed. But he carried on his feeding service with unabated joy.

Finally, he reached a stage where he had nothing at Velkadu with which to feed the devotees. He started for other places to earn money for feeding them. In his early years he had learnt the tricks of gambling and so now he decided to practise this as a trade. He toured the neighbouring towns, visited the gambling houses there, gained some money and with this fed the devotees.

In due course he reached the city of Kumbhakonam. Here he practised gambling systematically on a large scale with considerable skill. When he was playing several rounds, he skilfully yielded the first round to the adversary who was tempted to play more but Murkkar won over all the other rounds. As he was very skilful, no one could defeat him. If any one practised deceit, he pinned him with his sword. This trait earned for him the titles, "the good gambler", and Murkkar (the Fierce). He considered the money thus earned really as a gift of God and used it as aforesaid in the service of God's men. He used to have his food, after all of them had finished, only in the last batch. His selfless service purged him of all his sins. In due course, his soul came to rest at the Feet of the Lord.

There are no dramatic incidents in the life of Murkkar except perhaps that his whole manner of living was dramatic. He was in no way considered to be inferior to those who tread the accepted righteous path. Only the heart mattered. Inscrutable indeed are God's ways.

Perhaps a warning note may have to be sounded here. The story of Murukkar does not mean a licence to all gamblers. The oneness of purpose with which Murukkar set about his job can hardly be attained by another. And here we have to

remember the wise counsel of the sage who delivered the convocation address to the students who graduated from the *gurukulam* university, as narrated in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* : "Whatever righteous conduct in us you perceive, you follow. The rest you ignore."

32. SAINT SOMAYAJI MARAR

"I am the servant of Somayaji Marar of Ambar."

I

Marar was born in a brahmin family in the village of Ambar in the Chola country. He was in the habit of feeding Siva bhaktas. He had performed many vedic sacrifices and so was called Somayaji Marar (Somasi marar). He held a Siva bhakta, of whatever caste he be, in high esteem and had made it his daily routine to chant the Siva *Panchakshara mantra*. He used to go often to Tiru Arur (which was not far from his place) and there had cultivated the friendship of Saint Sundarar. He had conquered the senses and rid himself of the traditional six vices and in due course his righteous conduct and the friendship of Saint Sundarar lifted him into the Sivaloka.

II

Such is the brief story narrated by Sekkilar in his *Periya puranam*. But there is a popular legend which probably fills up some gaps in the story and reveals in a remarkable manner the service mind of Marar so much that we shall here give a brief account of it also. This is just a local legend and does not find place in the *Periya puranam*.

In any vedic sacrifice (*yaga*) all offerings are made into the sacrificial fire, Agni deva, who is supposed to receive them on behalf of the Supreme Being and take them to that Being. Marar once desired that Siva Himself should

appear in person to receive the offerings. He knew that Sundarar was a friend of God, the form of Tyagaraja at Tiru Arur, and so planned to befriend Saint Sundarar and through him to invite Lord Tyagaraja in person for his sacrifice and for acceptance of the offerings. He learnt that Sundarar's favourite dish was a pudding of *tuduvai kirai* (a green used as vegetable,) *solamn trilobatum* and supplied it to his kitchen daily for some time. The cooks were happy that they did not have to worry for the greens. However Marar stopped the supply one day Sundarar, missing his favourite dish that day, began to enquire and learned that Marar, an old brahmin, was supplying it gratuitously for some time. He called Marar the next day when he came and came to know of his desire to have Tyagaraja in person. Thereupon, unable to refuse the old man, who had laid him under an obligation to himself, he took his request to Tyagaraja.

Lord Tyagaraja, smiling, agreed. He desired to make public the nobility of the spirit of Marar and his universal love. "We shall go to Marar's *yaga* (sacrifice) in whatever form we like. It is upto Marar to meet Us and give Us the offerings." Sundarar conveyed the Lord's will to Marar. Marar agreed and returned home happy.

The sacrifice was arranged promptly and in due time, the hour for the offering of the sacrifices into the fire arrived. Vedic brahmins were gathered in large numbers and were chanting the Vedas. There was no sign of Lord Tyagaraja. Just at that time, a hunter followed by his wife and men and hunting dogs was seen hurrying towards the place of the sacrifice. As he approached, all the brahmins fled away, fearing pollution from the untouchable hunter. who kept on coming nearer and nearer. But Marar knew in his heart that the untouchable was God. He went to Him with his wife, prostrated before Him, took Him to the altar with due honours and gave him the offerings. Lord Tyagaraja who had really gone there in the guise of the untouchable was immensely pleased with the vision of Marar who saw God in the untouchable and so

The sacrifice performed Marar is an important annual festival in the temple known as Tiru (Ambar) Mahala Yajna, which attracts a vast multitude of people for worship.

33. SAINT SAKKHIYAR

"I am the servant of Sakthiyar, who always pelted a stone, without forgetting the feet of the Consort of Uma with large tucked up breasts,"

Formal religious worship and the rituals attendant on it very often assume greater importance among the average people than even the sincere longing and the feeling heart which should precede such worship. In the end, we have only rituals and forms, but not the devotion and the feeling for the mercy of God. The story of Sakthiyar is calculated to bring out in relief the importance of heartfelt devotion as against formal outward ritual.

In a small village in Tanjavur district was born Sakthiyar a farmer. He was a learned man but at the same time he extended his love to all sentient beings. Keen upon putting an end to his cycle of births and deaths, he directed his steps to Kanchipuram, which was then the most important seat of learning and philosophical guidance. He got to know the Buddhists there and was influenced to follow their doctrine. He learnt it fully and lived according to it for a long time, but his inner craving was not satisfied.

In the course of his further investigation, he learnt of the Saiva faith and this seemed to satisfy him. Here he learnt there were four entities, the individual who is the actor, his actions, their result, and the power that unites the result with the doer. He learnt that this power was the Lord God, the only thing that mattered was that the individual should always remember the presence of God, and that his own state mattered little.

When this wisdom dawned upon him, he followed the tenets of Saivism but did not care to change his garb, which continued to be the Buddhist garb he had assumed at Kanchipuram. He had made it a principle in life, never to sit down to lunch without first worshipping Siva in the temple. The symbol of the Siva-linga, installed in the temples, is one which has neither form nor is formless; it is a symbol of the Lord, is all Effulgence and all consciousness. Sakkhiyar used to worship this Linga.

As he was one day nearing this Linga for worship in the usual way, his mind was working inwardly and he lost count of any outward happenings. He had, perhaps absentmindedly, not brought any flowers for worship. His hand instinctively picked up a piece of stone that was lying nearby and threw it at the Linga, as though it were a flower offered for worship. To the Father in heaven who saw only the heart behind the act, the stone was as welcome as a flower.

The next day also, Sakkhiyar went to this place and remembering what he did the previous day, thought that this was just a suggestion of Siva's grace and pelted again another stone at the Linga. The service of pelting a stone seems to have been pleasing to the Lord because of the love inherent in it, just as the sandalled foot of Kannappar was taken by Him on his crown.

One day however, perhaps due to the pressure of farm work, he had omitted to worship the Lord in this manner, and sat down for his lunch. Immediately he realised his omission. "What a sinner am I! I have not thrown a stone at the Lord!" thought he, ran to the Linga and, in the usual way, without the least thought of I or mine, picked up a stone and threw it at the Linga.

The legend says that God was pleased at the selfless and singular devotion and dutifulness of Sakkhiyar and instantly gave him a vision of His divine form along with Sakti and gathered the devotee to his sacred Feet in Sivaloka.

The story of Sakkhiyar is very brief but it contains a number of lessons for us. In the course of his spiritual seeking, he

had become a Buddhist but, not being satisfied therein, he had begun to worship Siva. But outwardly he did not change his affiliation. Perhaps the alien religion had a greater hold on the people and having once acquired it, he did not want to retract. His reason was satisfied that all worship should go to Siva and his heart too had profound love and devotion to Siva. So he did not care for the externals. To him God was everything and he had no preference for a flower as against a stone. All thought of self and of the world had gone away from him. He saw only the all-pervading Universal Self and worshipped it. To wordly-minded people, throwing a stone might appear to be a sin, but Sakkhiyar had transcended all feeling of sin or merit and the Lord had accepted his stone as a flower.

34. SAINT SIRAPPULI

"I am the servant of Sirappuli, the giver with great fame."

Sirappuli was born in Akkur in a brahmin family and did the service of feeding Siva bhaktas and supplying them what ever materials they required. He performed many sacrifices dedicated to Siva and was always chanting His *panchakshara*. His great devotion to Siva conferred everlasting bliss on him in the end.

35. SAINT SIRUTTONDAR

"I am the servant of Siruttondar of Sengattangudi."

I

The one keynote to the whole of the *Periya puranam* is love and sacrifice in the cause of God. Where there is love, there is supreme sacrifice. Without sacrifice there is no

practice of love; it can at best be merely a profession of love. The *bhakti* considers all worldly attachments as bonds, fettering the soul to transient things, and hindering its onward march to an eternal life and an everlasting bliss. Attachment to worldly pleasures and material objects may perhaps be easily overcome, but attachment to human beings, one's own family, is not so easily thrown off. The ego-centred man marries and the centre of the ego shifts to the beloved, then to the children and, as years advance, the circle around the ego widens. The concept of family widens into one of society and ultimately one of the nation and the first ego-centred love now comes to be called patriotism. Modern history tells us that this has taken a heavy toll of sacrifices - of what was once held near and dear to man in the name of family. People we know had not hesitated to give up wives, children, or relations, for the sake of political ideologies. Sacrifice of the highest magnitude is possible even by humble individuals when the call of the ideal is heard.

This is more intensely true on the spiritual plane. People live at different planes of emotional and spiritual existence, and it is hard to comprehend from a lower plane, what happens at a higher plane. In the literary narration of the lives of some saints in the higher plane, the gruesome and the grotesque in poetry have been woven into a fabric of art, and here we enjoy the poetic beauty, a finished product, and do not stoop to examine the ingredients.

We shall now project this concept of sacrifice for an ideal into the spiritual field and try to understand the sacrifice of Siruttondar. We have seen in the Gandhian era that, to those intoxicated with national patriotism, no sacrifice was too high for the cause. The choice before men of God was always between family and God (or Truth), and they never hesitated in their choice of the latter.

II

Siruttondar was born in the town of Tiru - Sengattankudi in the Chola country in a family of village physicians. He was a pious devotee of Siva and was then known by the

name of Paranjoti. He was a mighty warrior, skilled in the management of horses and elephants. He was employed by the ruling monarch (Narasimha Varma I, the Pallava Emperor of Kanchipuram A. D. 630-668). Once, under the orders of the King, he marched at the head of a Pallava army against the Western Chalukhyas who had invaded the Pallava territory and, riding an elephant, he put to route the enemy forces and destroyed their capital city of Vadapi (modern Badami). This took place in 642 A. D. The king, learning that Paranjoti was an ardent devotee of Siva and that his overwhelming victory was due partly also to his devotion to Siva, saluted him and asked his forgiveness for having sent him on a war mission. Then he gave him enough riches and discharged him from his own service, so that he might be free to perform service to Lord Siva more freely. Paranjoti thereupon returned to his village and there led an ideal householder's life, along with his wife, Tiruvenkattu Nangai (the damsel of Tiruvenkadu). He had made it a principle in his life first to feed Sivabhaktas and then take his food. He had never deviated from this rule.

Since Paranjoti always behaved towards men of God as a humble servant, he came to be called *Sirut-tondar*, the *little servant*, and was always known thereafter by that name. In due time, a boy was born to the couple and he was named Siraladevan. The boy grew up and was sent to school to study under a teacher. Lord Siva in Kailas was moved by the devoted services of Siruttondar and concluded that the time was ripe for conferring eternal bliss on him. So one day He came to Sengattankudi attired like a hungry *Bhairava*. He reached the house and called out whether the *bhakta* was inside. The maid of the house by name, Sandana-nangai, came out and, finding the ascetic visitor, fell at his feet, and told him that Siruttondar had then gone out in search of a *bhakta* as usual for feeding him and that he would be back any minute and requested him to step inside. The visitor however replied, "We do not enter the houses where only women are to be found," and made as though to depart. Just then, Tiruvenkattu nangai, wife of Siruttondar, who was busy inside, came out and entreated the visitor to wait, saying that

Siruttondar would be very happy to see him, as he had gone out only in search of such a guest for lunch. But the visitor was adamant in refusing to stay on, but said that he had come from Uttarapati (the north) only to see Siruttondar, that he would not stay in the house without him, but that he could be found under the *Bauhinia* tree in the temple, if Siruttondar wanted to see him. The *bauhinia* was the temple tree (sthala vriksha) of the local Siva temple.

When Siruttondar returned, his wife told him about the *Bhairava* visitor and directed him to the *Bauhinia* tree in the temple. He went there quickly, found the visitor and bowed before him.

"So you are the great little servant!"— quipped the bhairava. In all humility, Siruttondar replied, "I am so called by men of God. Kindly go to my house and partake of the humble fare which I may give you." The bhairava replied : "We are coming from the north, just to see you. But it is not in your power to give us food."

Gradually the Bhairava unfolded His requirement, namely that He should be fed with the cooked flesh of the first born son of a house, the father joyously carving up the child and the mother equally joyously holding him. Without the least hesitation Siruttondar agreed, went home, told his wife and both decided that their child was the best offering possible, as no other parent would be willing to cut up his own child. Siruttondar brought the child from his school and after bathing him, he cut him up, his wife holding the boy. They kept aside the head as uncookable, prepared the dish and then Siruttondar went and brought the Bhairava. He said that he could not eat alone and wanted some companion to share the food. As no one was then available, he insisted on Siruttondar himself sharing in the eating of his own child's flesh! To humour the visitor Siruttondar agreed. The Bhairava asked for the head of the child! The resourceful maid had not thrown away the head but had cooked it too, perhaps to meet a contingency like this, and produced it.

The Bhairava then demanded for his host's son to be present for the eating but when Siruttondar said, "He is not available", He ordered him to go and call him. Again to humour the guest, Siruttondar did so and, what a wonder! the boy ran to his father as though he was returning from the school. Not wasting time to wonder at the boy's being alive now, but eager only at making the guest eat, Siruttondar hastened to the table to make the guest eat his food. A further wonder! There was no guest and no dish but the Lord gave him a vision of Himself in the heavens.

Siva had come there to test the servant and has now finished his experiment. Siruttondar had passed the test and had emerged with flying colours. The purpose of Siva's mission, namely to prove that there is no limit to the sacrifice of a real *bhakta*, had been achieved and demonstrated. Siruttondar along with his wife and son and even his servant-maid were vouchsafed a vision of the Lord and all of them were lifted into the heavens, towards everlasting bliss, which was really what Siruttondar had sought.

III

The legend of Siruttondar is one of the most popular and well known stories in all *Periya puranam*; perhaps only the story of Nandanar is equally well known. Both have been made the subject of many musical dramas and performances. The story of Siruttondar has had, throughout the centuries, even a greater appeal than that of Nandanar, among the not-so-educated classes. Sekkilar has no doubt woven a profound classic out of this story but the story is current among the unlettered masses in all the nooks and corners of Tamilnad. Siruttondar-feeding is an annual festival in summer in many places in the modern day.

The entire narration in Sekkilar is most dramatic. He enacts a drama on the stage. We are all the while witnessing it, knowing it is a drama though it is all real for the actors.

The bhairava desired human meat but we find that no meat was eaten ; though a child seems to have been slain in a gruesome manner, the child is quite hale and healthy at the end of the ordeal : there has really been no killing !

Just as the sublime and the gruesome are interwoven in the story of Siruttondar, so also fact and fiction, history and legend are woven together to produce the fabric that is Siruttondar.

Two pilots mounted into their cockpits and flew their bombers loaded with atom bombs into Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the year 1945 and dropped their lethal loads on the two innocent cities. A million Japanese were wiped out in both the cities, apart from the toll of all other animal life taken. Why did they do it ? They knew what they were doing. Did they have any enmity towards the millions who were killed ? No. They had been led to believe that material peace would dawn on America and their allies by thus killing and crippling the enemy. It was not theirs to question the belief. They just acted on the belief. We may be sure that neither of them would have liked to harm even a fly in ordinary life. But they had no qualms in killing a million innocent people. All in the name of the nation and of patriotism !

Siruttondar had in mind spiritual peace. He was prepared to sacrifice his nearest kith and kin for ensuring that peace. His action is thus no more gruesome than that of the said pilots, who but for the element of war, would have been branded the cruellest of murderers in all human history. Now they are hailed as the Saviours of the war !

36. SERAMANPERUMAL (KAZHARITRU-ARIVAR)

*" I am the servant of Seraman, the Kazharitruarivar, whose
munificence is like the cloud's "*

Seraman Perumal, author of three poems collected in the 11th Book of the Saiva Canon, is known in the Saiva History of the Saints as Kazharitru-Arivar. The significance of this name will be explained in the story that follows. He was a contemporary and friend of Saint Sundarar and lived around the year 700 A. D.

Perumakkodai was a prince of the Sera dynasty ruling from Kodumgolur. He was daily worshipping Siva enshrined at Tiru Anjaikkalam. At that time the ruler of Seranad relinquished his kingship and repaired to the forests, for performing penance in order that he might ascend to the heavens. The officers of the court went to Perumakkodai and requested him to ascend the throne and rule over them as their king. He felt that the crown might cause some hindrance to his worship of God. So he went to the temple and prayed for some enlightenment. By Siva's grace, he obtained not only the power to rule the land without detriment to his worship, but also the great gift of knowing every thing that any one might say anywhere. There upon he assumed the reins of government there. He was thence forth known as Kazharitru-Arivar (one who knows all that was said).

After coronation, he worshipped in the temple and was returning to the palace, mounted on the royal elephant. A washerman was coming along the road. He was carrying a sack of soda earth on his head; soda earth was being used to wash clothes. Because of slight rains on the way some of the earth had got dissolved and drenched him; when it dried, it clothed him in a white powdery colour. When Seraman saw this sight, he thought quite naturally that this was a Siva bhakta, his whole body smeared with Siva's sacred ash. He jumped down from the elephant, ran to the washerman and bowed before him.

Poor man, he was aghast. In all humility, he cried, "Your majesty, I am your humble washerman!"

Seraman now understood the position. He simply said: 'I am a humble Sera. Do not worry. You reminded me of the emblem of Siva' and sent him on his way. Naturally members of the royal retinue were amazed at the deep devotion of Seraman.

Days passed. He was ruling the land with great love of God. He worshipped Lord Nataraja. It so pleased Him that at the conclusion of his puja every day, He caused the tinkling of His anklet to be heard by Seraman in token of His acceptance of his puja. Seraman was happy at this recognition of his worship by the Lord Himself.

There was one singer in Madurai by name Pana-Bhadra. He used to sing in the Lord's presence in the temple there. Siva was pleased with his service of song and planned to help him with money. In a dream He gave him an epistle and asked him to take it to Seraman and get money. He narrated this to Seraman also in his dream. Acting accordingly Bhadra one day reached Seraman's palace with the epistle. The king received him well, saw the epistle, bowed to Bhadra and gave him plenty of money to his heart's content and gave him also his own kingdom. But Bhadra refused the kingdom but took the money, bade him farewell and returned home, immensely happy.

It so happened that one day after his usual puja, Seraman did not hear the tinkling of Nataraja's anklet. He felt miserable. "I have offended the Lord and so He has not accepted my puja. Why should I live hereafter?" So saying he drew out his sword in an effort to stab himself to death. The same moment he heard the tinkling sound. "My Lord, why the delay in your approval of my puja?" he cried.

The Lord planned to inform him of Saint Sundarar at distant Tiru Arur. He said, "My friend Sera, just now

Sundara worshipped Us at Chidambaram and sang songs on Us. We were listening to the songs Hence the delay in expressing approval of your puja.”

Seraman was amazed at the way Siva's grace functioned with reference to different people. Eager to visit Chidambaram and see Sundarar, he started at once. In due time he reached Chidambaram, worshipped there and sang his poem of one hundred verses-the *Ponvannathandadi* on Nataraja. Again he heard the tinkling; he felt very happy and stayed there for a long time.

Then he started for Tiru Arur where Sundarar lived. Leaving Chidambaram he visited many shrines and finally reached Tiru Arur. Sundarar had heard about his arrival and so hastened to welcome him. The two became fast friends. Sundarar was also known thereafter as the friend of Seraman. When they worshipped in the Arur temple, Seraman sang the poem, the *Tiru Mummanikkovai*, in thirty verses. He was the guest of Sundarar and his wife Paravai for a short period. The King Seraman had his food on the same table along with the Adi Saiva brahmin, in the house of Paravai, of the temple-servants' caste. Then both of them went on a pilgrimage of many temples in Cholanad and other places including Madurai.

Returning to Tiru Arur, Seraman invited Sundarar to his place. Thither both of them went. After spending some time with Seraman in his place, Sundarar started to return to his own place at Arur. Seraman sent with him large presents.

After a long time Sundarar made a second visit to Seraman's city. Worshipping here, he knew his end was near. He was summoned to Kailas. The legend says a white elephant came to take him and he went to Kailas mounted on its back. Seraman not willing to be left behind, mounted his horse, uttered the Siva mantra into its ear, and by the strength of his yoga practice reached Kailas even before Sundarar. When the Lord Siva asked him how he came there without an invitation, he replied that he simply followed Sundarar by Siva's own grace. He sang there a poem known as *Tiru-Kailaya Jnana Ula*, published it in the presence of the Lord

there and sent it back to the earth through Mahasasta, who published it at Tiruppidavur. He was made head of Siva's forces.

These three poems of Seraman have been gathered into the 11th Book of Saiva Canon. The two poems, *Ula* and *Mummanikkovai* are the first poems of their kind in the Tamil language.

37. SAINT GANA NATHAR

*"I am the servant of the servants of Ganānathar of
Sikali, girt by the sea"*

Manual service to God and godly men is known as the *charya marga* and it is the simplest way of reaching God and attaining everlasting bliss. This is open to all people, in all professions, to men and women alike, and to family men and ascetics as well. A large number of the *nayanmar* mentioned in the *Periya puranam* had followed this path. The story of Ganānathar is illustrative of the efficacy of this path in conferring oneness with the Godhead.

Ganānathar was born in the town of Sikali, the birth place of Saint Jnanasambandhar, in a brahmin family. He was a married man and in that state performed his services to the Lord enshrined in the local temple. Whenever any servant of God had any difficulty, Ganānathar served him and helped him out of it.

It is astonishing to find how many things we consider modern had been anticipated by the ancients and provided for. Technical training and training schools are a modern institution. It is unbelievable that this was foreseen by the Siva bhaktas in the ancient past and provision made for it in regard to service for God.

Gananathar trained devotees of God in many branches of physical service to Siva and we may say he conducted a training school for the purpose. The pathways to God are fourfold in Saivism - *charya* manual service to Siva, *kriya* ritualistic puja or worship, the practice of *yoga*, and *jnana*, pathway through divine knowledge. By saying that Gananathar conducted a training school in the path of *charya*, the poet seems to give out a list of what constitutes physical service. He says that the saint helped men who performed the different services in the temple. They are gathering flowers, tending the temple flower garden, weaving many types of floral wreaths, carrying water for the Lord's bath, cleaning and sweeping the temple premises night and day, washing the temple floor, lighting the numerous lamps, copy-writing the Saiva Canon on palm leaves and reading and reciting them. Not only did he perform these acts of service but he trained others too in similar service. Along with this, he was himself worshipping Saint Tiru Jnana Sambandhar three times a day, with a heart full of love. These services gained for him entry into Kailas where he was raised to be the head of the forces of Siva.

38. SAINT KUTRUVAR

*" I am, the servant of Ku ruvar the Lord of Kalandai armed
with the bau'inia decked spear "*

He was a chieftain of the city of Kalandai and great in his love of Siva bhaktas and in chanting His name. He had fought many battles with other chiefs and princes and thereby come to possess a large army of the four divisions and similar other requisites of kingship. But he had no crown. So he went to the Priests of Nataraja (Tillai-val-andanar) at Chidambaram and requested them to crown him as king. They refused saying that they could crown only a Chola prince and no one else. Fearing the wrath of Kutruvar, they left the

Chola country and ran away to the Seranad, leaving only one family to guard the royal treasure of the Chola crown.

Kutruvar felt sorry, and went to sleep with the thought that the feet of Lord Nataraja should be his crown. The Lord appeared in his dream and crowned his head with His feet. Kutruvar felt happy and thereafter ruled the land with His feet as his crown. He worshipped in many shrines and finally reached everlasting bliss.

Kutruvar might have been one of the chiefs ruling Madurai at the time of the Kalabhra clan which over-ran the Pandiya and the Chola countries during the centuries three to six A. C.

39. SAINT PUHAL - CHOLAR

"I am the servant of Puhai - Cholar who passed away at Karuvur girt with groves."

Where any grievous wrong has been committed and no redress is possible, the person who feels that he was responsible for that wrong gives up his life, as a kind of amends, for he can do no more than this. Such a kind of self-immolation has been heard of many times in legend and literature. The legend of the seventy velalar who together gave up their lives because a merchant had lost his life through their assurance of safety is well known. This legend is also mentioned by Saint Jnana Sambandhar. In religious history, there are many such stories. One is that of Puhai - Cholar.

Puhai - Cholar ruled the Chola country from the capital city of Uraiyur (in modern Tiruchirappalli city). He was devoted to the sacred ash as the emblem of Siva, and in his reign Saivism flourished in the land. Once he went to Karuvur where the petty chiefs from the outlying western districts came to him to pay homage and pay their tributes.

There was a bhakta there by name Sivakami Andar. He was proceeding to the temple with floral wreaths for decking the image of Siva. The royal elephant which was led along the street seized the flowers from the bhakta and spoiled the flowers. Eribhaktar, another devotee saw this, drew his sword and felled the elephant and its attendants. When the King heard of this, he went to the spot and learnt from Eribhaktar all that had happened. He felt that as king, he was responsible for the misdeeds of the elephant and the neglect of its attendants. So now he presented Eribhaktar his own sword and asked him to kill him. The story of Eribhaktar is narrated in detail in section 7. Such was his sense of devotion and responsibility.

When he asked his officers whether there was any one who did not bow to his sovereignty, they replied that there was one such chief named Adhikan, entrenched in a hill fort. He ordered his army to raid the fort and destroy it. The forces went and in the fierce battle that ensued, Adhikan was defeated. He ran and hid himself. The forces had brought to the Chola many horses, elephants and other valuables as spoils of war. They had also brought to Karuvur the heads of the warriors killed in battle. When the Chola inspected the spoils, he saw the head of a soldier with matted locks. He was awestruck. "Is this the way I administer the land! My forces have killed a Siva bhakta who had just fought in return for his food!" Tears ran incessantly from his eyes. Then and there he decided to give up his life. He ordered "Call my son and crown him, so that he might rule the land and carry on service to Siva."

He caused a great fire to be lit. He placed the head with the braided hair on a golden plate, and carrying it on his head, went round the fire, and uttering the name of Siva entered the fire and gave up his life. No greater atonement can a human being offer for the sin committed unknowingly.

40. SAINT NARASINGAMUNAIYARAIYAR

*"I am the servant of Narasinga Munaiyaraayar,
the true devotee."*

Forgiving is one of the greatest attributes of God. Without forgiving, there is no redemption for the penitent sinner. All religions praise the Grace of God, which is in other words, an aspect of Divine Mercy which is showered on all, the sinner and the saint alike. A sinner who sincerely repents and feels for his past misdeeds renders himself fit for receiving God's mercy. Most stories of all the sthala puranas dwell on this aspect of Grace - forgiving and often even nirhetuka - kataksham, mercy bestowed for no apparent cause.

The human being raises himself to the divine level when he is able to shower his mercy on all defaulters and sinners, without any reason or discrimination. The passionate appeal for mercy made by Shakespeare in the *Merchant of Venice* is a classic on the need for this divine attribute in all human transactions.

The story of Narasinga Munaiyaraayar is the story of a man who was prepared to forgive everything before God. He was a prince ruling over a small territory in the South Arcot district. He had rid his country of all evils and ruled with a spirit of love and service to God. He was conducting proper worship in all the shrines. He had a special attachment to the symbol of the sacred ash of Lord Siva. On the Tiru - Adirai day which is specially sacred to Him, he used to present a hundred gold coins to every pious man who came to him, smearing the Sacred Ash on his body.

Once, he was distributing gold in this manner to godly men on such a day. There came to him then a sinner and a wretched debauchee, on whose very person, the signs of his sinning were repulsively visible. People staying nearby despised him and kept away from him. But Narasinga saw the man, saluted him and welcomed him. "You people spurn him for his past debaucherous conduct. But the man has now

put on the sacred Ash which I consider has purified him." So saying, the prince gave the sinner twice the normal gift of a hundred pieces of gold, bowed before him and sent him on his way.

Such was the frame of mind of this Narasingar who was, as we have said, himself a prince. No wonder he was canonized as one of the saints of the Saivas. If persons with power and might could be such fountains of kindness and mercy, then surely this world will be transformed into something much more lovely and joyful and be akin to the kingdom of God on earth.

This is the same prince who saw one day the little child Sundarar playing in the streets at Tiru Navalur, was attracted by the beauty and charm of the boy, took him home to his palace and brought him up in regal splendour. We know that when Sundarar grew up into manhood, he became a saint and a Saiva Acharya, through Divine Grace.

4 . SAINT ATI-BHAKTAR

*"I am the servant of Ati bhakta of Nagai on the sea coast
tossed by great waves."*

The History of the Saints of Saivism abounds in the stories of Saints from the very lowest classes of society. Meat eating was looked upon with great disdain by the learned and the godly. So fishing in those days was practised in Tamilnadu only by the lowest classes of people and a fisherman was an outcaste.

From such a background hails our Saint Atibhaktar (the most devout). He was born in the fisherman community in the prosperous city of Nagappattinam, on the east coast of the Chola country, having a large shipping business. He was a chief among the fishermen. He had several fishing boats

sailing over the seas and bringing him vast heaps of fish. These made him quite affluent.

Ati-bhaktar was a devotee of Lord Siva and he was following one principle in his fishing. Every day, he picked up the best fish from the net and dedicating it to the feet of Lord Siva, let it go free into the sea. He was adhering to this principle under all circumstances. Even if he were to net only one fish, he allowed it to go free in the name of the Lord.

It so happened, however, that for many days he was able to catch only one fish. Every day he set the fish free in the name of the Lord. His income naturally dwindled and his resources gradually disappeared. He had to go even without food for several days. But still he held fast to his vow of releasing one fish for God.

And finally, when he was dragging the net one day, a very big gold fish, all glittering with gold as though embedded with precious stones and gems, was caught. It was so beautiful, that even the whole world could not be a fit price for it. When his men took it before him, he said, "This jewelled gold fish is a fit offering for God, Let it go forth free" and threw it into the sea. No thought of his own starving and poverty stricken condition entered his mind.

Such single minded devotion on the part of an unlettered fisherman against the severest of ordeals evoked the sympathy of Lord Siva who appeared before him and took him to Sivaloka as the head of his Forces.

42. SAINT KALIKKAMBAR

*“ I am the servant of Kalikkambar with the ornamental bow,
who cut off the hand (of his wife).”*

In the town of Pennagadam in modern South Arcot district was born Kalikkambar in a merchant community. He was devoted to Siva enshrined in the large local temple and he undertook the duty of feeding the men of God. His wife used to help him in welcoming the guests and feeding them.

One day he brought home several bhaktas for food. He was cleaning the feet of the men of God as usual and his wife was pouring out the water for the purpose. When she was duly pouring water, her husband noticed that she hesitated in the case of one particular person. He looked up and understood the reason. That person in the Siva bhakta garb had formerly been a servant in Kalikkambar's household. He had left their service and then had become a bhakta wearing all the emblems of Siva and had now gone to the house of Kalikkambar along with the others for food. Kalikkambar's wife had recognised him as their former servant and so her momentary hesitation. Kalikkambar understood all this the instant he looked up. “My wife has remembered this man's previous life and hence feels reluctant to worship him” thought he. According to him a Siva bhakta is to be worshipped instantaneously, whatever his past life might have been. He removed the water pot from his wife's hand, drew out his sword and cut off the unwilling arm of his wife, poured the water himself, cleaned the bhakta's feet and then continued his reception of the guests and fed them all. He was doing this service of feeding for long when in the end he was raised to the company of other released devotees under the shade of Siva's Feet.

43. SAINT KALIYAR

"I am the servant of Kaliyar."

In Tiruvottiyur at the northern limits of modern Madras lived Kaliyar, a pious man of the oilman community. He had made it his duty to pour oil into the lamps in the shrine of Siva there, both inside and outside, night and day and light them. He was doing this service for a long period, when Siva desired to make his services known and recognised by the public. He caused the wealth of Kaliyar to dwindle. But still he continued in his service to God. When he had no oil from his own oil mill, he worked for hire among his own people, got paid in oil for his services and used the oil for the temple. They stopped giving oil. Then he went to the places wherever oil mills were working. He did manual work in the mills such as pouring the seeds into the mill, extracting oil and driving the bulls. He used the wages thus earned for the purpose of lighting the temple lamps.

It so happened that he was unable to secure employment in this work anywhere in the neighbourhood. He sold all his belongings. There was now no more chattels to be sold. He decided to sell his wife for money. But no one came forward to buy her! Still he was not disheartened. He determined to give up his life, if his service had to be discontinued. He went to the temple and placed the wicks on the lamps as usual. There was no oil; he decided to burn the lamps with his own blood. He took a sword and proceeded to sever his head from the neck.

The all-merciful God could stand no more. He seized his arm and stopped him. Kaliyar saw before him Siva high in the heavens on His bull mount. The cut in the neck closed up and with folded hands he prayed. Siva conferred on him eternal bliss. The people at large came to know of the measure of Kaliyar's devotion to Siva.

44. SAINT SATTI

*"I am the servant of the servants of Satti of jewelled feet,
the lord of Virinjai."*

He was born in the velalar community noted for its truthfulness in the village of Varinjaiyur in the Kaveri delta and was a virulent type of Siva bhakta. Whenever he heard any one speak ill of the men of God, he used to cut the offender's tongue with a knife (*satti*) and hence his name. He was doing this for quite a long period. He was also devoted to the cause of the *Panchakshara* of Siva. In due course he was given eternal rest under the lifted foot of Nataraja.

45. SAINT AIYADIHAL KADAVAR KONE

*"I am the servant of the servants of Aiyadihal
Kadavar kone."*

He was a king of the Pallava dynasty who ruled from Kanchipuram. He was a valiant soldier who had subdued many foes. He ruled the land, spreading the Saiva cult. Other rulers did his bidding and both the Sanskrit and the Tamil languages were at his command. After some time, he felt that ruling the land was a nuisance and so placing his son Rajasimha on the throne, he devoted his life to service. In this service he went on at our of the shrines of Siva. In every place he worshipped, he sang a Tamil *Venba* (a short verse in four lines) asking men to go and worship there. He stayed for some time at Tillai and then again went to all the temples and performed appropriate services in all the places. Many a day he was serving in this manner till at last he was taken to Sivaloka.

Rajasimha is otherwise known as Narasimha Varma Pallava II (686-705). His copper plate grant mentions the fact that his father was having a crown of *rudraksha*. Saint

Sundaramurti, who has sung the Tiru-tondat-tohai enumerating the devotees of Siva, was a contemporary of this Rajasimha Pallava, who is himself a canonised saint (vide Section 51).

Of the many songs sung by Aiyadigal only 24 are available and they have been collected into the Nineth Book of the Saiva canon. He is identified with the ruler Paramesvara Varman of Kanchi (A. D. 670-85) and the son crowned by him is the famous Rajasimha mentioned elsewhere.

All his songs refer to the last days of man on earth and enjoin him to pray at the feet of the Lord at the local shrine, before life ebbs away. The following is the substance of the first verse:

*All activity ceases,
The kith and kin frown,
Old age has arrived.
Even before the axle
Of this life snaps, and
You reach the grave,
O my heart, think of the Lord
Of the Dance Hall of Tillai.*

46. SAINT KANAMPULLAR

"I am the servant of Kanampulla nambi who had taken protection at the feet of the Blue-throated Lord."

He was a Siya bhakta who lived in Irukku-velur on the banks of the river Vellaru. He was a rich man and he determined to use all his riches in the service of God. Lighting lamps in the temple appealed to him and he dedicated himself to this service for a long time. Perhaps God wanted to test him. He became very poor. He went to Chidambaram, worshipped Nataraja and continued his

service of lighting lamps. He sold all his chattels and performed the service. He had now exhausted all his material possessions and there was nothing more to be sold. But he did not like the idea of getting help from others. So he resorted to physical labour. He cut a kind of inferior grass called *kanampul*, sold it in the city and with the money obtained, continued his service. One day however, the grass did not sell. What could the poor man do? He did not despair; he twisted the grass into a kind of rope - wick and burnt it in the place of a lamp. When he found that even that did not suffice, he applied his own tuft of hair in the place of a wick. The burning hair even singed his scalp. Siva was moved by his act and awarded him everlasting bliss in the Siva loka.

47. SAINT KAARI

"I am the servant of Kaari."

Kaari was a brahmin poet of Tirukkadavur. He used to sing erotic poems known as *kovai* in praise of the three ruling princes of Tamilnad, the Sera, the Chola and the Pandiya, hold discourses on those poems to their satisfaction and receive large gifts of money from them. With the money thus earned, he built many temples to Siva. He also used to give presents to the Siva bhaktas. He had always Siva in his heart. His fame spread far and wide. Having lived in this manner, in due time he reached Kailas, the abode of Siva.

48. SAINT NINRA-SIR NEDUMARAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Ninra-sir Nedumaran who was victorious in the Nelveli battle because his mind was full with the thought (of Siva)."

He was the Pandiya monarch (640-670) ruling from Madurai in the middle of the seventh century, and the husband of Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi, herself a canonised saint. He was a great soldier who had seen many battles and was always victorious in them. His battle of Nelveli was famous in history and he is always celebrated as Arikesari the victor of Nelveli. Early in life he embraced Jainism and plunged the entire kingdom into that religion. But the queen was very a staunch follower of Siva. She invited Tiru Jnana sambandhar to go to Madurai. He did so and with God's help he suppressed Jainism there and once again Saivism flourished. The King returned to the Saiva fold through the grace of Jnana Sambandhar and thereafter he championed the cause of Saivism and when his end came he entered the Siva loka.

The legend is that he was a hunch back and when Jnana-Sambandhar sang in his *Tiruppasuram* (song placed on the river waters), 'Let the King prosper', his back became straight and he was thence forth known as Nedumara, the Tall Pandiya.

Apart from the parents of Saint Sundarar, King Nedumaran and his queen Mangaiyarkkarasi are the only couple, canonised as Saints.

49. SAINT VAYILAR NAYANAR

"I am the servant of Vayilar of the ancient Mayilai where the brightness of the red corals recovered from its coast dispels darkness in the city."

modern Madras, perhaps in the 7-8th century A. C. Born in the velalar community he always worshipped God mentally. Unceasingly he meditated upon God, creating a temple for Him in his own heart. The lamp of true knowledge lit up that temple. He bathed the Lord with the water of infinite joy and love was the food offered to Him there. He was performing this worship of love unceasingly for long and in due time his soul was given refuge at the feet of God.

50. SAINT MUNAIYADUVAR

"I am the servant of the great Munaiyaduar with the sharp spear."

In the service of God any work is honourable. Many had done manual labour and utilised the earnings in the service of God. Some others had been in different occupations, perhaps not approved in Saiva society, and utilised their income in God's service. Munai-Aduvar was one such saint.

He was a velala warrior of Tirunidur in the Kaveri delta. He was a great soldier, powerful in warfare and always victorious in battle. He was therefore called Munai-Aduvar (one who slashed the foe in battle). Men who happened to be vanquished in any fight used to go to him for help. He used to represent them in the duel, for the consideration of a good sum of money. This used to be kept in deposit until he returned victorious and was then given to him. He used all this gold for giving away to Siva bhaktas and for feeding them sumptuously. This work of fighting the battles of others for gold, he was performing for a long time and he distributed the gold to godly men. Finally he reached Siva loka through the grace of Siva.

51. SAINT KALAL SINGAR

"I am the servant of the servants of Kalal-Singar the great Kadavar King who rules over all the worlds girt by the seas."

Devotion to God often places the devotee in a high pitch of devotional frenzy where normal codes of conduct do not apply. Such people have their own codes and they apply it not only to themselves but to all who come in contact with them. Extraordinary humility and extraordinary violence result from this. Even in the case of crowned kings we see this trait of extremes. In the story of Seraman Perumal we noticed extreme humility. We see the opposite trait in the case of this Pallava (Kadavar) King.

Kalal-Singar was a Pallava ruler of Kanchipuram. He had defeated the northern (West Chalukya) kings in battle. He used to visit Siva shrines in Tamilnad and offer worship. One day he was worshipping Tyagaraja at Tiru Arur. His queen was at that moment going round the shrine and marvelling at the grandeur of the temple. As she reached the flower hall where floral wreaths were being woven for the Lord, she saw a flower which had fallen down by the side of the hall. She picked it up and smelt it. Just at that time, a bhakta by name Seruttunai happened also to go round. He observed the queen's action. To him the act of smelling in the temple premises a flower intended for the Lord was an act of unpardonable sacrilege. He ran up to her and cut off the offending nose with a knife. The queen fell down and cried with pain.

Kalal Singar came round the shrine and duly reached this place. "Who did this cruel deed?" he thundered. Seruttunai approached and explained what really took place. Kalal Singar then exclaimed, "Was it not the hand that took the flower? That deserves to be cut off first", and drawing his sword he cut off the bejewelled hand of the queen. Such devotion had never before been seen and even the celestials expressed their great amazement and joy. The King ruled for a long time thereafter and finally attained bliss.

Kalal-Singar is a historical figure. He is identified as the Pallava Rajasimha who ruled from 686 to 705 A. D. at Kanchipuram.

II

For the historical completeness of the story of this King, we are giving the following account. He was the son of Paramesvara Varma Pallava (670-685) celebrated as Aiyadihal Kadavar Kone (in section 45). He was a contemporary of Saint Sundarar and was the monarch who constructed the famous Kailasanathar temple at Kanchipuram, whose *Kumbhabhishekam* was ordered to be postponed by Siva Himself, in the story of Pusalar Nayanar. These incidents are connected with *Periya puranam*. There is yet another revealing incident unconnected with the lives of the Saints.

There were perpetual feuds between the Pallavas and the Western Chalukhyas. Paramesvara Varman was a mighty warrior but not so his son Rajasimha. The rulers of Kanchi were always a source of jealousy for all other ruling monarchs and at this period, Vikramaditya the Chalukhya ruler, knowing that Rajasimha was a weak ruler, and desiring to avenge the defeats of his ancestors, marched on Kanchipuram with a huge army, intent upon destroying the city. Rajasimha had already fled the city and so Vikramaditya had no resistance to meet. Seeing the Kailasanathar temple *vimana* from a distance, he was attracted by its grand appearance, and halting his army at some distance, entered the city and went into the temple. Much moved by the architecture and sculptures in the temple, he declared : "I shall not harm this temple and the city which produced it", and ordered his army not to despoil them.

His queen Rangapathakai was even more attracted by the Temple. She took the artisans who had built the temple to the Chalukhya country and had a replica of the temple constructed by them at a place called Pattadakka. Such is the historical account of the king known as Kalaisingan and his temple. The temple known as the Kailasanathar temple is existing today in the city as a fine monument to the Pallava architecture.

52. SAINT IDANGALI

“I am the servant of the great Idangali wearing many petalled garlands.”

Some times we come across stories of saintly men who indulge in anti-social activities in order to fulfil some goals which they had set before themselves. Means may be considered questionable but we are told that even God winked at such acts. The traditional story of Tirumangai Alvar in the Vaishnava Canon may perhaps illustrate the above remark; he committed highway robbery in order to feed Vishnu bhaktas. Vishnu had not censured Tirumangai for his conduct. A similar instance we find in the story of Prince Idangali, centuries before Thirumangai Alvar.

Idangali was a chieftain of Kodunkolur in Konadu. Under him, Saivam flourished and temple worship was properly done. Through love of Siva he was always helping Siva bhaktas. There was at that time a devotee of Siva who had made it a rule to feed Siva's devotees daily. One day he had no money or materials and it looked as though his rule would have to be broken on that day. But he devised a means. He entered the granary of the chief at midnight and was stealing the paddy there, when the watchmen caught him and hauled him up before the chief.

When Idangali asked him why he did so, the bhakta replied: “My vow of feeding Siva bhaktas was likely to be broken today. Hence as I had no other alternative, I did this.”

The chief was very much moved: “This bhakta is indeed a treasure house for me” he cried, and as his heart had melted at the devotion of the bhakta, he caused a tomtom to be announced throughout the town that the devotees of Siva might take whatever they wanted from his treasury.

When such people did really take things from his treasury, he felt very happy. Thus he ruled over the land for a long time with love and devotion to the Sacred Ash and in due course attained the Feet of the Lord.

53. SAINT SERUT - TUNAI

"I am the servant of Seruttunai, the lord of Tanjai."

Seruttunai (help in battle) was born in Tanjavur (different from the modern city) in a *velalar* community. He went to Tiru Arur and was performing there many acts of devoted service to God, and worshipping during the prescribed hours of *puja*. One day it happened that the queen of the Pallava King Kalal Singar came there to worship. She took a flower which was lying by the side of the temple flower hall and smelt it. Seruttunai who saw this was unable to tolerate this sacrilege in the temple. It is held to be sacrilege even to smell a flower intended for Siva worship. He caught hold of her hair and cut off her nose which smelt the Lord's flower. (However it should be noted that the queen did not actually take a flower intended for *puja*, but took one which was not in the hall but beside the hall, separate. The queen of the great Siva bhakta King is not likely to forget the rules of floral garland making for God. Probably Seruttunai mistook her act as smelling not a discarded flower, but one intended for *puja*.) In this manner he was performing his devoted service to Siva at Tiru Arur and in due time attained bliss under the lifted foot of Nataraja.

The sequel to his act is narrated in the story of Saint Kalal Singar (given in section 51).

54. SAINT PUHAL-TUNAI

"I am the servant of Puhā-tunai, who, shaking as the serpent playing on the tiger skin worn round by Siva, yet fixed his mind on His Golden Feet."

Puhā-tunai was an aged Sivacharya in the village of Puttur on the banks of the river Arisil. (His name means, one to whom repute was the support). Sivacharyas are the particular clan that was privileged to perform worship in the temple for the well being of the entire community. He was performing temple worship in the prescribed manner. At one time there was a severe famine in the country. He had no food for many days. But he did not swerve from the duty of Siva puja. By day and by night he did the abhisheka of the Lord. One day in particular he was so weak through hunger that unable to hold the heavy water pot, in which he carried water for abisheka, he dropped it on the Siva linga itself and fell down. In this unconscious state he had a dream in which Siva informed him that he would be given a gold coin daily for the duration of the famine conditions to purchase food stuffs. Puhā-tunai was greatly moved by the special favour shown to him by God. He received the coin and exchanged it for food stuffs. His physical famished state improved and he continued in his service of worship. In due course he was granted final beatitude at the sacred feet of the Lord.

Agama injunctions are very stern in dealing with acts like the dropping of the water pot. Here, the priest not only dropped it but dropped it on the linga he was worshipping. But God looks into the heart, and the true love of Puhā-tunai earned for him even immediate relief from the famine. The story of Puhā-tunai is one of those illustrating the truth that the heart matters more than the rituals.

55. SAINT KOTPULI

"I am the servant of Kotpuli with the powerful spear."

People in the ranks of the bhaktas do not hesitate to give up their lives when the service to God which they had taken upon themselves could not be fulfilled for any reason. In the same manner, they do not also hesitate to take the lives of others when their service is interfered with. We have explained elsewhere how such acts are termed by the general run of people as abnormalities but how they can be explained as quite normal in the plane of the spiritual or devotional existence of the bhakta concerned. In the story of Eripattar we saw how he did not have the least hesitation in killing the royal elephant and its attendants, who were responsible for harming the service of another bhakta. The life of Kotpuli is another such story where he did not hesitate to kill others, in his service to God.

Kotpuli was born in Tiru Nattiyattankudi in the Chola country in a *velalar* family. He was a captain of the Chola forces, victorious in battle. He utilised all his earnings for purchasing rice for feeding the Siva bhaktas and in storing it for future use. Such was the nature of his service to God.

Once he had to go to the battle front. He purchased enough paddy and stored it. Then he called his kith and kin and told them: "This paddy is now stored here for the purpose of offering to God. In the name of God, you shall not use it for any other purpose." Thus cautioning them, he went to the front.

As natural in the lives of the elect, trials come only in such circumstances. There was a severe famine in the village. There was no food and many might have had to die. The relative of Kotpulis thought that they would utilise his paddy-store in such a dire state and did so, proposing to replenish the store later when conditions improved.

Kotpuli returned victorious from the battle field and came home with rich presents from the king. On his way he heard what had taken place in his village. He was naturally very angry that his people had betrayed his trust and vowed to kill all those responsible. As he reached his place, relatives welcomed him. Concealing his intention, he called them all together as though to give them presents. When all were assembled, he posted a servant at the gate to prevent any one escaping and then massacred every one assembled, mothers fathers, brothers and relatives who had partaken of the paddy store kept for God. There was only one little boy left. As he pounced upon him, the servant cried, "This is the only child of the family. He has not eaten God's rice. Please spare him." But Kotpuli retorted, "He may not have taken the rice. But he has suckled at the breast of her who had eaten that rice", and cut him also in two.

Siva appeared before him and said, "My friend, those who were cut to pieces here by you, have also cut asunder their bonds and ascended to a higher life. We shall take you also with Us." Kotpuli attained final beatitude.

56. SAINT PUSALAR

"I am the servant of Pusalar of Ninravur whose tongue always utters the great Vedas."

Worship with a full and sincere heart is always more acceptable to God than worship through elaborate eternal rituals. There are innumerable stories in the Saiva hagiology to illustrate this truth.

Pusalar was born of a brahmin family in the village of Tiru-Ninravur (modern Tinnanur near Madras). He was very learned in the scriptures. All his wealth he distributed to the men of God. Then he desired to build a temple for God and worship Him there. But all his efforts to get the requisite

funds therefor proved of no avail. This pained him for some time, but finally he decided to build the temple not with material objects, but with objects conjured up through his imagination.

Accordingly, he collected all the building materials in his mind, gathered together the architects and masons and began the work on an auspicious day. Absence of funds never worried him. He did everything through the exercise of his mind.

Excavations were made, basements laid according to the agama rules, pillars erected, beams spread, roof laid, and finally the towers also were constructed, all in his imagination.

Mortar plastering was completed, the temple well was dug, compound walls were erected and the temple tank also was finished. Lastly, he fixed an auspicious day and hour for consecrating this mentally built temple.

In the meanwhile, the Pallava ruler of Kanchipuram was building a large stone temple for Lord Siva. He had spent thereon his vast resources and large man power. He had completed it and had fixed a day for its consecration. This day coincided with the day fixed by Pusalar for his imaginary temple. Naturally none could have known anything about Pusalar's temple, because it existed only in his mind. But Lord Siva wanted to make known his intense devotion. So, He appeared in a dream before the king on the night previous to the consecration day of his large stone temple and said; "My friend, please postpone your consecration to some other day. We are entering tomorrow, the temple built by Pusalar at Ninravur."

The King was not a little astonished. Since such was God's command, he was not jealous. He had not known that anyone else was building a temple in his kingdom. So, he wanted to seek out Pusalar and bow before him. Immediately he set out for that village and there enquired about Pusalar's temple. People said there was no such temple. Then he

asked them about Pusalar and they offered to bring him. But the king would not have it but himself went to the brahmin's house, bowed before him and asked him about the temple he had built.

The poor brahmin was amazed at the kindness shown to him by God in having recognized the temple which existed only in his own imagination and then told the king about it. Now the king was greatly moved at the devotion of Pusalar which was so graciously acknowledged by the Lord Siva Himself, and saluting the pious man, took leave of him, returned to his city and postponed the consecration of his temple. Pusalar duly performed the ceremonies for his imaginary temple and lived his full life of piety and devotion. He ultimately attained the feet of the Lord dancing in the Golden Hall.

We would add a note on this story. The King occurring in this story is the Pallava Emperor Rajasimha, 686-705 A. D. a contemporary of Saint Sundarar. The stone temple built by him is the most glamorous construction now known as Tiru-Kailasanathar temple situated at the west in the city of Kanchipuram. The King calls himself an *agama priya* and a Saiya siddhantin in his inscriptions. They also record the fact that he was the great Lord who listened to the *asariri*, the voice from the heavens, meaning thereby the instruction of the Lord Siva to the king in his dream to postpone the day of the consecration of his Kailasanathar temple. (vide section 51).

57. MANGAIYARKKARASI, THE QUEEN SAINT OF MADURAI

"I am the servant of Maani (Mangaiyarkkarasi) with the jewelled bangles on her arms."

I

The chief Tamil speaking areas in those days were ruled by two dynasties, the Cholas and the Pandiyas

(besides the Seras on the west coast, which area later isolated itself as the Kerala State) and their kingdoms correspond to the modern Tanjavur (with Tiruchirappalli, Pudukkottai and part of South Arcot districts) and Madurai (with Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts). The name of the Queen of Madurai was Mangaiyarkkarasi, "Queen among women." She was a princess of the Chola dynasty, united in wedlock to the Pandiyan ruler. It so happened that, at this period, the Pandiyan ruler and all his subjects had forsaken their ancient Saiva faith and embraced Jainism, an alien faith in the land. All Saiva temples and places of worship, and rituals had been abandoned and, to the Queen, the ancient city had the appearance of a grave yard. The Queen, along with the Minister, was the only person who had hung on boldly to their ancient faith.

It is a historical fact that the different Pallavas and the Pandiya monarchs had been Saivas, Vaishnavas and Jainas, at different periods while all the Cholas had been only Saivas and no Vaishnava or Jaina had sat on the Chola throne. Mangaiyarkkarasi was the daughter of the Chola ruler, Manimudi Chola and she was still adhering to the old faith of her forefathers in the Chola country, although her husband the king was a convert to an alien faith. There was considerable religious bigotry and intolerance in those days and it speaks volumes for the solitary queen who boldly followed her faith and was always earnestly seeking, in collaboration with the Minister, ways and means to re-establish her religion in the land.

The Queen was of an entirely independent spirit and she had a wonderful intelligence system of her own, in the midst of the whole hostile nation. She was closely watching events in the country of her birth and, in due time, came to learn that a boy saint by name Tiru Jnana Sambandhar had been visited by the Grace of God at the early age of three and that he was touring the land singing the praise of the Lord and bringing all the people into His

fold. She had then a natural desire to invite him to the Pandiya country and win back the king and his subjects to Saivism through his intercession. The Queen and the Minister immediately sent a trusted deputation to wait on Sambandhar and invite him on their behalf to visit the Pandiya country, for the definite purpose of reclaiming it.

The messengers met Sambandhar at a place about a hundred miles from their City and laid before him the prayers of their Queen and the Minister. He readily agreed to go over to Madurai for propagating Saivism. In due course, he reached the city after a long journey. The Queen sent the Minister to receive the young saint and arrange for his comforts and for the stay of his large retinue. Sambandhar then went to the Madurai temple to bow at the feet of the Lord and seek His guidance in the mission he had taken up. Thereupon the Queen came to the temple and bowed at the feet of Sambandhar and expressed her great joy at his visit. He was equally moved by the humility of the Queen and her strength of will, which made her continue to adhere to her faith, amidst the opposition of her husband and his subjects. When he went to worship before the Lord in the shrine, his mind was full with the nobility, modesty and devotion of the Queen and he spoke of them in a melodious song he sang there. "We bow before this ancient shrine of the Lord Siva, where daily worships Mangaiyarkkarasi, the Queen of all women, Princess of the Chola race, the emblem of modesty, the Angel residing on the lotus, the Queen of the Pandiyas."

From the next day, Sambandhar began a struggle for supremacy with the king's priests, in their thousands. The Queen we find, was always by the side of the king, as in duty bound, although she thought he was misguidedly following an alien faith. Seeing the small boy poised against the vast hordes of aged priests profoundly versed in their scriptures, she was naturally very much concerned for the tender years of Sambandhar, where the odds against him were very high. The young saint read her anxiety on her face and, to dispel her fears, said : "My royal Queen! Do not be anxious that I am

after all a young child, not yet in my teens. The Grace of the Lord is with me. I shall not be easily vanquished by these godless people." We have seen how in due course Sambandhar had to pass through three ordeals in his bouts with the priests and how he came out successful in all of them and how he fulfilled the great desire and expectation of the Queen by re-establishing the ancient religion of the land. She lived to a ripe old age and in due course her soul was gathered to rest at the feet of the Lord.

II

We shall do well to remember one or two points in the singular story of Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi. Emancipation of women is a favourite slogan of modern social and political agitators. We know women had not the right to vote till recently even in the most advanced countries of the West. Viewed from this background, the freedom for action and the boldness of Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi in the early seventh century in the Tamil country is something unique and unparalleled. Her story is not a mere legend. Her husband, the Pandiyan Ruler (640-70) is a figure known to history through inscriptions and literary references. Sambandhar is also a historical figure, as well as the historian Sekkilar who has written these biographies. We cannot but marvel at the boldness and strength of conviction of the lady who continued to follow, undaunted, her own faith, even while her husband himself deserted the faith of his forefathers and embraced a new religion. She was a lone figure worshipping in the temple and going her ways in a land where millions went a different way. History gives us woeful tales of religious persecution and even in the twentieth century, religious persecution under various garbs is a major international problem. It is indeed heartening to find our Queen having the freedom to follow her own faith placidly, unmolested by others.

Gandhi called himself the one man boundary force, in the non-violent war in an unarmed India against foreign armed might and aggression. Mangaiyarkkarasi was such an one-woman boundary force in preserving godliness and

culture against the onslaughts of godlessness, armed might and aggression in religion.

Political intelligence is a highly developed science in modern state craft. We find she had her own intelligence ring through which she knew of the tours of the boy - saint and was able to invite him to her city, without the least interference from her own king or subjects. She had not only this freedom but the freedom of action to invite whomsoever she pleased, to preach her own religion and fight irreligious forces. We know the result. Irreligious forces were subdued and religion was once again established in the land.

Another aspect in the personality of the Queen evokes our unqualified admiration. Although she was able to invite Sambandhar to her city, she had, as a woman and as the Queen of the land, certain restraints placed on her. She could not go out and receive the Saint when he entered the city. The only welcome she could give him was through her Minister. But her womanly instinct showed her a way out. She was free to visit the temple whenever she liked and she timed it to the hour when Sambandar visited the shrine for worship and there welcomed him. There was no taint in her meeting any one in the holy place and there was no fear of any eavesdropping spies too.

The story of Mirabai, the Queen of Chittore in North India is well known. In the face of the opposition of her husband the king and his subjects, she went on worshipping Krishna and finally won over her husband and her kingdom to her faith, through love. She had sung in Hindi many sweet songs in praise of the Lord. Although her devotion and songs are modelled on the life and work of the Vaishnavite Lady Saint Andal of Tamilnadu, her life and struggles have a parallel in the life of Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi. The love and devotion of both to their husbands were unwavering and both ended by converting the king and his subjects to their own religion.

Thus we see in Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi, a unique model of Tamil womanhood, political diplomacy, religious freedom and the highest dedication to godliness, and above all, modesty and duty to the home. Her life and work will serve as a beacon light to guide our women for thousands of years to come.

Sekkilar has mentioned the story of this Queen in just three verses because it is fully given along with the exploits of Sambandhar at Madurai. We have taken some incidents relating to her from Sambandhar's life and elaborated them here.

58. SAINT NESA NAYANAR

"I am the servant of Nesan."

It is a fundamental belief in Saivism that service to the servants of God is as meritorious as service to God Himself. Service to such men consisted of many little acts including the giving of clothes. As is well known, food and clothing are the first two of the three primary needs of a human being. We have seen many devotees devoted to the service of feeding. Nesar is a rare instance of one devoted to the service of clothing.

Nesar was born in the weaver's community in the town of Kambili. He had dedicated his thought, word and deed to the service of God. He always contemplated the lotus feet of Siva in his heart, his lips uttered the supreme Panchakshara mantra of Siva and his hands wove the waist band, loin cloth and clothes for the devotees of Siva. When Siva bhaktas went to him for these articles, he presented these to them. He made these presents unceasingly and these services earned for him final beatitude.

59. KO-CHENGAN-CHOLAR

"I am the servant of Senganar who ruled over the world as monarch of the South."

I

The Chola monarchs who ruled for about five centuries from the ninth to the thirteenth from Tanjavur and Gangaikonda cholapuram have been fittingly called Temple Builders. The temples built by them in granite number more than a thousand. In an area which did not have a single piece of rock, which is just a level plain, they transported physically many hillocks and built huge mountains of temples. This type of service to God remains unsurpassed not only in Tamilnadu, not only in India, but in the entire world. The inspiration to these monarchs was the body of devotional hymns sung by the Samaya Acharyas Saints Sambandhar, Appar and Sundarar.

There was an earlier monarch who had similarly built such temples probably in brick and mortar and rarely in granite. He seems to have lived some two hundred years before Sambandhar. His temple building activities have been praised by all the three nayanmar-Sambandhar, Appar and Sundarar. Appar says that the temples he built might have been 78 in number. And Tirumangai Alvar, one of the canonised saints in Vaishnavism, in one of his songs on Vishnu enshrined at Tiru Naraiyur, says that this Chola had built seventy temples to Siva. Apparently, Ko-Chengan Chola Chenganan, had a liberal outlook and although he did not worship at the feet of Vishnu, he seems to have helped the devotees of Vishnu by constructing this temple and probably some more temples in granite for them. Most of the later Chola emperors had followed his noble example and had helped in the worship of the Vaishnavites too.

A Cholan-Chenganan is celebrated in the legends and literature of the Sangham age and he is different from this temple builder Chengan-Cholar.

An explanation for Chenganan's construction of temples for Vishnu also may be found in the political conditions in the Pandinad of his day. Pandinad had been overrun by a tribe known to history as the Kalabhras who were aliens in language, religion, race and culture. They were Jains, opposed to the Saiva and the Vaishnava religions. When Ko-Chenganan saw the suppression of Saivism in Pandinad, he was unable to intervene. His own country had been overrun by another band of Kalabhras who had captured Puhar (Kaverippattinam) and ruled from there. Chenganan was ruling over a small territory round Uraiyr and his resources in man and material were limited. Hence though he could not intervene in Pandinad, he took up the task of re-building both Saiva and Vishnu temples in his part of the land probably because he felt that both these sections of the Vaidika religion had to be strengthened, if the anti-religious onslaught in Pandinad were to be halted, and prevented from spreading into his own land.

There is a unique feature in all the temples built by this Chola. He has built them on a high base and provided the entrance to the main temple, not in the east in front as in the case of all the temples, but at the south, as a smaller opening or side entrance. During the periods of the Chola reign, it was usual to have elephants in all the temples as part of the temple regalia and the elephants used to go into the large hall inside the entrance to escort the image in procession in times of festivals. But in all the temples built by Chenganan, the elephant can go into the outer *prakara* but cannot enter the temple at all ; the door way had been made so small.

II

A legend is narrated to explain this feature and this legend finds place in the story of Chenganan as narrated by Sekkilar.

On the banks of the Kaveri, Siva manifested Himself in the shade of a white *jambu* tree as a Sivalinga; a white elephant was worshipping the *linga* in that shade. It used

to lift water in its trunk for the Lord's bath and strew flowers on the linga. The place came to be known as Anaikka (the bower of the Elephant). A spider was also there and by its *jnana* acquired in previous births, it proposed to stop the dry leaves from the tree falling on the linga, by weaving a web over the linga. The spider's web appeared like a canopy over the Siva linga. But when the elephant came and saw the web, it considered the web as dirt or defilement and so swapped it off with its trunk and performed its usual *abhisheka* and worship. The spider saw the destroyed web, took it to be an accident during the elephant's puja and so it wove its web again. The elephant again destroyed it. Now the spider knew that its web was destroyed wantonly and so was angry. When the elephant again came for worship, the spider entered into its trunk and stung it. Unable to bear the poison of the spider, the huge animal fell down, beat its trunk on the floor and died. The spider inside the trunk was also crushed to death. The elephant attained final release while by Siva's grace the spider was born in the Chola race.

Subha deva was a Chola king. Kamalavati was his queen. They had no children for a long time and then after many prayers to Nataraja the queen became pregnant. Siva had caused the spider to be born as the child of this couple. Just when Kamalavati was about to deliver the baby, a royal astrologer predicted that if the child were born not then, but half an hour later, he would grow up, as indicated by the stars, into a powerful emperor, ruling all the three worlds. The strong willed Kamalavati determined that her son should be born half an hour later; she directed that her legs should be tied together and she be held feet up and head down for the specified time. A male child was born; but because his birth was artificially delayed, his eyes were red. She saw the baby, and saying, "My boy is Chenganan (the red eyed)," she breathed her last, because perhaps of the unnatural delay of child birth.

Such is the legend connected with the birth of king Chenganan. Through perhaps a memory of the past birth,

he took it as a hobby to build temples in stone for Siva. First he built the temple at Tiru-Anaikka; in memory of the happenings in that birth, he caused all the temples to be so built that an elephant could not get in. In due time he had also fine houses built for the temple priests of Chidambaram, who have since been canonised as Saints. He was worshipping at Chidambaram for a long time. He performed many services for Siva and finally when his end came, his soul came to rest under the feet of Siva.

III

The story of Ko-Chengan Chola is vindicated by his successors in the royal dynasty. We have an authentic history of the Chola race from the middle of the 9th century to the last quarter of the 13th century. We find that all the rulers who ascended the Chola throne were ardent followers of Siva. We cannot say the same of the other dynasties - the Pallava and the Pandiya thrones had Saivas, Vaishnavas and even Jains on them.

*May you all go to worship Vishnu
At the handsome madakkoil at Tiru Naraiyur,
Constructed by the mighty Emperor
Of the great Chola dynasty
Who ruled the world, having built
Seventy handsome madakkoil to Siva,
Of eight arms whose tongue
The Rig Veda adorns.*

This is verse 8 of the decad of Tiru Mangai Alvar on the Tiru Naraiyur Vishnu shrine. In all the other verses of the decad also he glorifies the Chola Emperor, by speaking about his prowess in the victorious battles at Venni and Alundai and his success in battle over the Vel of Vilandai. These praises from the Alvar are a great tribute to the King Ko-Chenganan in the context of the political situation in the fifth century,

60. SAINT TIRU NILAKANTHAR- THE YALPPANAR

"I am the servant of Tiru Nilakantha Yalppanar."

In ancient Tamilnadu, the musicians were a caste by themselves and it was considered to be one of the lowest. They had a large instrument called Yaal, (corresponding to the modern Veena) of which there were several types. Carrying this instrument these musicians visited the courts of princes and the halls of patrons to give several musical performances which were richly rewarded by the patrons. Usually they toured with their wives and both gave also dance or dramatic performances.

When times changed and the patrons were fast disappearing, these bands instead sang before Lord Siva enshrined in temples. People loved their music and helped them with food and clothing and rich ornaments.

Nilakanthar was one such singer, of the panar caste. His wife was known as Matanga-chulamani, the crown jewel of minstrels. Together they visited many temples and sang before the Lord there to the accompaniment of their own instrument. Their music in the large temple at Madurai was very pleasing to the Lord who ordered the temple authorities to place a plank or pedestal for the Panar, so that he might stand on it while singing and rest his large musical instrument on the plank to ensure that it did not get damp by contact with the damp floor and thereby deaden the melodies arising out of it. They placed for him a plank of gold and Panar stood on it and sang his delightful devotional songs.

In due course, he heard of the greatness of the young Saint Sambandhar of Sikali and went there with his wife. Sambandhar welcomed him and thereafter Panar and his wife became part of the travelling troupe of Sambandhar. Sambandhar was a high caste brahmin and it is noteworthy that he never for a moment hesitated in admitting this low caste Panar into his intimate fold. He had transcended all

thought of caste or class and was able to perceive in all godly men the inner spirit of service to God. In the story of Saint Nilanakkar we have seen how Sambandhar was particularly solicitous of the welfare and accommodation of this Panar and his wife in the house of Nilanakkar amidst high caste brahmin quarters.

We have also seen in the life of Sambandhar another incident dealing with our Panar, how a slight conceit among the Panar people on account of their music was subdued by the young saint by his singing of a song which went beyond the scope and range of the instrument. The Panar couple, it is interesting to note, were the only couple mentioned among the followers of Sambandhar.

As days went by and the end of Sambandhar drew near, Nilakantha Yalppanar and his wife, were some of the fortunate few who were present at Sambandhar's wedding and were allowed to enter Eternal Bliss through the Divine Effulgence which lit up the Temple on the occasion.

Thus, in the story of Panar the musician, we also see the castelessness of the godly men.

61 & 62. SADAIYAR AND ISAI JNANI

They were the father and the mother respectively of Sundaramurti who sang the *Tiru-Tondattohal* enumerating the names of the devotees of God and saying that he was the servant of the servants of these men of God. By virtue of having given birth to Saint Sundarar, his parents too are considered as Saints and included later in the list of the 63 Saiva Saints by Sekkilar.

In Sekkilar's words, Sadaiya nayanar begot, so that the whole universe may prosper in its servitude to God, Nambi Arurar, who befriended the Lord as a comrade and

sent Him as his messenger of love to the lady (Paravai) who was married to him, and who himself was a matchless companion of Seraman.

Of Isaijnaniyar the mother, Sekkilar says : "She was the rightful wedded wife of Sadaiyanar of limitless fame, she gave birth to Nambi enslaved by Him who destroyed the indestructible fortresses. Can I glorify her, Isaijnani of the great lineage ? I can not and nobody else can."

Her very name is significant. Isai jnani - one who was well versed in the science of music - a name meaningful in the context of the Tamil *Pan* music of the Devaram period.

In the last verse of his poem Tirut-tonda-tohai listing the devotees of God, Sundarar refers to himself as the beloved child of Sadaiyan and Isaijnani and so Sekkilar has included these two also in his list of Saints. The name of Sundaramurti makes up the total of 63 Saints of the *Periya puranam*. His story is narrated in detail at the beginning of this series,

WOMEN SAINTS

The canonised women saints in Saivism are three. They are the Lady Saint of Karaikkal, the Queen of Madurai and the mother of Saint Sundaramurti. But apart from these three, there is an outstanding figure in Saivite hagiology which requires separate narration and that is Tilakavati, elder sister of Saint Appar. Her story has been briefly told along with that of her brother but yet her work and sacrifice deserve to be treated separately.

The lady of Karaikkal was a Saint-singer who had steeped herself in a divine ecstacy which she had communicated to us in her songs, and thereby opened up a path way for saints in the next centuries to evolve a definite system of philosophy indigenous to the land and its people.

The Queen of Madurai was quite a remarkable regal figure, an ardent devotee and an able diplomat, who by her own efforts was able to reclaim the entire nation, including her husband and king, back into her own fold of Saivism. It is remarkable that this couple, the Queen and her husband the King, is the only couple where the two had been counted as Saints by Saint Sundarar, besides his own parents.

Before taking up the story of Tilakavati next, we would like to refer to the sterling character of some women in the service of God, in the stories of the saints. Tiruvenkattu Nangai, wife of Siruttondar naturally tops the list. She agrees unhesitatingly for the cutting up of their only son, in order that the Bhairava visitor could be fed under his own terms. As demanded by the cruel bhairava she holds their only son when the father carves him up! Words are inadequate to describe the sacrifice of this mother.

Similar is the deed of the unnamed wife of Saint Appudi, who hastens to lay the table for the visiting Saint Tirunavukkarasu without batting an eyelid for her first son bitten by a snake and lying dead as it were! She bundles up his body in a mat, leans it against a wall and proceeds with the work of feeding.

The wife of Tiru Nilakanthar who stays him with an oath, "Thou shalt not touch us," the wife of Ilayankudi Marar who resourcefully suggests to her husband to gather up the seeds sown in the field the previous evening, the wife of Iyalpapai who steps over to the side of the visiting bhakta, the moment her husband told her "I have given you to him," the wife of Amarniti who instinctively stepped into the scales beside her husband who was weighing his belongings and himself against the loin cloth of the Siva bhakta, and the wife of Nilanakkar who instinctively blew on the Sivalinga with her mouth to drive away a spider - all are on the same category as those mentioned earlier - eager to serve and help their husbands in their service to God.

Tadakai, daughter of the temple priest of Tirup-Panandal, does not figure as a character in any of the stories of the *Periya puranam*. But an understanding of her devoted service is essential for appreciating the second incident in the life of Saint Kumkuliya-kkalayar which took place at Tirup-Panandal. Her story is given in his life (at pages 62-63) in section 10. The Sivalinga in the shrine inclined its head to receive her flowers, when she was unable to move. The place today takes its name after her as Tadakesveram.

Other instances may be mentioned. These indicate the happy and felicitous life the men had been having in *illaram*, the householder's life and in the service of God with equal dedication and co-operation from their wives. They could be counted as the golden flowers of womanhood in any nation's history.

II

SAINT TILAKAVATI

The story of Tilakavati, if not as spectacular as those of the first two lady saints, Karaikkal Ammai and Mangai-yarkkarasi enumerated as Saints by Sekkilar, is equally, if not more, important in that she gave us the saint who preached that humility and service are the pathways to God realisation and that manual labour is itself dignified, who had made a total surrender of self to God, through the most moving and melodious hymns in the language and who is counted as a Saiva Samaya Acharya.

As we have seen, Tilakavati and Appar were born as sister and brother in a farmer's family in modern South Arcot district. When Tilakavati came of age, her father had made arrangements to give her in marriage to one Kalippahai, a young man of equal status in a neighbouring village. He was a valiant man, high in the king's esteem and also of a religious disposition. We should remember here that there was no love marriage then and that parents of the bride or bride groom chose the partner.

Now, just as the marriage negotiations were over and arrangements were complete for conducting it, news came that the Chalukhya king was invading the Pallava territory. Naturally there was a general mobilisation and Kalippahai, who was a brave soldier capable of leading a contingent himself, was summoned by the Pallava King. Marriage could not be an excuse for not going to the battle front. Kalippahai went to the king. A detachment was placed under his command and he was sent to the front. He took a valiant part in several engagements and hard fighting was going on for some time.

Meanwhile, the father of Tilakavati had some ailment and in a short time he died. His wife did not like to live after her husband died and so she gave up her life immediately, leaving their daughter and son alone in the world. While this was happening here, the fight in which Kalippahai was engaged grew fierce and finally the Pallava forces were victorious. But Kalippahai was killed in the battle.

Coming close on the death of both of their parents, this news was a terrible shock to Tilakavati and her little brother. She said : "My parents proposed to marry me to Kalippahai. So I belong to him. After his death, I have no more existence. I shall now give up my life." But her brother immediately replied : "Sister, little boy that I am, I have no parents. I consider you as my parent and so am able to put up with my grief. But if you plan to put an end to your life you will find that I shall have died before you." When Tilakavathi heard this she was helpless. Naturally she did not want to lose her brother. So out of love and compassion for him, she continued to live. She lived thereafter the life of a widow. Jewels and trinkets were for her no more. She remained in the house and her only ornament was love for all life, says the poet. She led a life of austerities and penance.

Her young brother grew up, well versed in all the books and scriptures of his religion. But as fate would have it,

in the course of his comparative study of religions, he was attracted by the Jain way of life. So he left his sister, went to a Jain monastery and was ordained a priest there. In due course, by his learning and way of living, he rose to the position of the head of the monastery, with the title, Dharmasena.

This was of course anathema to his sister. She could not for a moment reconcile herself to the thought of this dear little brother of hers, for whose sake she had been leading a life of penance and devotion, having embraced an alien religion and become a leader thereof. She was daily doing little acts of service in the local temple of Tiru Adihai and thither she used to go daily, bow before the Lord and pray that her erring brother be brought back to her own ancient Saiva fold soon. In due time her prayers were answered. She had a dream in which the Lord of Adihai told her that a colic would afflict her brother and that he would be redeemed through it.

Accordingly, her brother Dharmasena, began to suffer from a stomach pain. This gradually developed into a very acute stage. The medicines, incantations and magic of the monastery were helpless to cure it. He became desperate now and sent his cook as messenger to his sister for help. She was surprised to see his messenger. So her question was, "Any thing wrong?" He explained Dharmasena's plight and invited her on his behalf to go to him. "Go and tell him that we shall not enter the Jain quarters" she replied.

He returned and at midnight Dharmasena came to her and fell at her feet saying: "My beloved sister, I am dying of pain. Save me". She immediately thought of her dream and knew that this was God's way of answering her prayers. She lifted him up, and with the Lord's name on her lips, applied the sacred ash to his forehead and then took him to the Lord's presence in the temple.

She performed her usual services in the temple and in the presence of the Lord prayed for help to her brother.

Through His Grace, the darkness enveloping his mind was cleared and he was given the gift of singing the Lord's praise in beautiful song. He prayed for God's Grace and relief from pain which was at once granted. Thereafter he went on singing God's praises and performing manual service in the temples.

The story of Tilakavati ends here. She was pleased with God's kindness to her brother and led a life of penance and devotion as before. Her life is unique in the history of women who had devoted their lives for service to others. Women had been devoted mothers, devoted wives and devoted daughters. But as a devoted sister, the life of Saint Tilakavati is in a class by itself. Still, when he deserted her and her religion, she never forgave him but again she never also forsook him. By divine intervention, she had him brought back to her own fold.

We find parallels to the way of life Tilakavati was leading, in modern life also. Sri Saradamani Devi, the consort of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, found that she could no longer lead the life of a wife to the Paramahansa, who worshipped all womenfolk including herself as the manifest forms of the Supreme Godmother. She reconciled herself to the position and evolved herself into a Saint-Mother for all the disciples of Ramakrishna. So was Tilakavati on the death of Kalippahai; there was no more thought of marriage for her. She lived on through love for her brother, which was sublimated into love for all life.

NINE GROUPS OF SAINTS

The Saiva Saints as sung by Sekkilar in his *Periya puranam* are known as the 63 saints. They are the sixty individuals mentioned by Saint Sundarar, his two parents and himself. Besides these, Sundarar has mentioned nine groups of godly people and said that he was the servant

of the servants of those people. Sekkilar has devoted a chapter each to these groups in his *puranam*. Some are dealt with at length in half a dozen verses or more and some others in only one or two verses. Some of the chapters contain very lofty thoughts. We shall therefore mention them here in a brief compass.

1. TILLAI VAL ANDANAR

The *Periya puranam* opens with this section. Tillai-val - andanar are the priests of Nataraja at Chidambaram. In the course of history, they are known not as brahmins but as Siva - brahmins, later styled as Dikshitar by which appellation they are known today. "They are well versed in the four paths leading to God. As they have the supreme gift of performing puja to Nataraja here now, there is no other fortune which they need strive for." Lord Siva Himself as Tygaraja at Arur gave the first line of the poem to be sung by Saint Sundarar as 'I am the servant of the servants of Tillai val-andanar.' There is for them no greater glory than this.

2. POYYADIMAI-ILLADA-PULAVAR

They are the poets whose servitude to God is flawless. They are the poets who give expression in felicitous language and have a knowledge of many books; they have realised that the goal of all these is devotion to God. Conducting themselves in this manner, they have attained the feet of God. A half baked research worker in the modern period published a booklet trying to prove that the Poyyadimai Illada pulavar here mentioned is Manikkavachakar. No student of religion worth the name gave any credence to his theory which goes against all accepted truths and conclusions of literature, history and religion.

3. PATTARAY-PANIVAR

These are they who bow to God as well as His devotees. They would go into raptures when they see bhaktas; would follow them, as the calf runs after the cow. They would dedicate all their good deeds to Siva. They would always

listen to the praises of Siva. Standing, sitting, lying down, walking - they would never forget the feet of Lord Nataraja, in whatever work they might be engaged. They would not like to enjoy the fruits of penances done in the name of God.

4. PARAMANAIYE - PADUVAR

Those who sing on Him, the Parama, only. The Parama is the destroyer of the three fortresses, the wearer of serpents, the One that shines in one's steadfastness, He who is all the worlds, who fills the eyes although not approachable by the bodily instruments. He is the Parama. They would learn not only Tamil but also Sanskrit and the other languages and sing soulful songs on Lord Nataraja, in a moving manner, with a heart feelingly united to Him.

5. CHITTATTAI - SIVANPALE - VAITTAR

Those who had set their hearts on Siva. They are in the stage of *dhaaranai*, earlier to the stage of *dhyanam*, of containing in their hearts the *Nadanta* principle of the Lord Siva which is the perfect and the Supreme Effulgence beyond the stage of the deities in the lower five stages of creation etc. They place their *chitta* at Siva, through their service to the Dancer that is the root of all the Vedas, set their hearts through the practice of yoga.

6. TIRU ARURP - PIRANDAR

Those who are born in Tiru Arur are all members of Siva's forces. The familiar saying is that those born in Tiru Arur would attain final bliss; hence their greatness. Arur was considered in Saiva legends to be the most ancient city and perhaps the first place where Siva manifested Himself for the sake of the mortals. The greatness of birth at Tiru Arur is illustrated in the story of Saint Naminandi.

7. MUPPODUM - TIRUMENI - TEENDUVAR

Those who are empowered to touch the Siva linga all the three times in the day and perform worship. They are the Adi Saivas. The performance of temple worship is

their sole right according to the Agamas. They are given the privilege of performing puja to the Lord through love.

8. MULU - NIRU - PUSIYA - MUNIVAR

The sages who consider the emblem-the sacred ash-as Siva Himself and smear it on their person. They prepare the three types of the sacred ash in the manner prescribed. They are pure inside also as they are externally pure by the application of the ash. This burns out their three fold *malas* (fetters).*

9. APPALUM-ADI-CHARNDAR

Those who worship Siva from beyond. This word *beyond* includes everything and gives the widest possible range of meaning to the concept of Siva bhaktas. The godly men implied are those who live beyond the Tamil spoken areas, who had lived and may hereafter live beyond the ages of the devotees sung by Saint Sundarar; we may project it a little and say that those who are beyond the range of the Saiva religion too are Siva bhaktas if they have love for God in their hearts.

The term beyond is a flexible one and gives room to different concepts of interpretation - beyond the land ruled by the classical crowned monarchs three, beyond the period of the devotees mentioned by Saint Sundarar, earlier and later : these are the elaborations given by Sekkilar. We may add - beyond the lands where the Tamil language is spoken beyond the Saiva religion itself, the emphasis being on love of God and love of humanity.

NOTE

A special note is here necessary regarding the Nine groups of saints. Of the nine, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 can be anywhere. Any one anywhere may be considered a member of these six groups. But not so the other three. 6. *Tiru Arurp-Pirandar* : one has to be born at Tiru Arur. No one can lay

* The manner of preparation of the sacred ash is given in this section in four verses. These are considered to be a late interpolation.

claim for inclusion in this group unless he had been actually born here ; the position is quite simple. 7. *Muppadum Tirumēni Tinduvar* : This is not so simple. One has to be born as a sivacharya in the *Sivacharya* community. Under the agamic injunctions and the laws of the land as they stand at present, only he who is born as a Sivacharya can touch the Sivalinga and perform the *Parartha Sivapuja* thrice a day, morning, noon and evening. Others cannot do this and therefore cannot lay claim for inclusion in this group.

Separate mention is necessary regarding the first group, 1. *Tillai val andanar*. They are now considered to be the *Dikshitar* of Tillai. They were said to be originally three thousand *families* in number of whom Lord Nataraja Himself was one. Today there are hardly 200 *persons* in the community which has deteriorated through inbreeding, lack of education and undesirable ways. Another tragedy in their lives is that these poor people today ape the *smartha* brahmin and always attempt to "rise" in the caste ladder by calling themselves simple brahmins like the ordinary *smartha*, denying their special glorification as the *Siva brahmins*. Umapati Sivacharyar, a *Dikshitar* like any of them, also a Santhana Acharya (round 1300 A. D.) was a sivacharya. But these people today try to tow the line of the popular Sankara and would fain deny the Agamas and the Saiva Hymns and Sastras.

They are the modern illustrations for the words of Tiru Mular : "The blind and the blind perform a blind dance and the blind and the blind fall into the labyrinth" ; the Upanishad says :

Avidyayam antare varitta-mana :

Svayam dhitra : panditam manyamana :

Dandamanah pariyanti mudhah

Andhenaiva niyamaana yathandah.

"Staying amidst ignorance, these people consider themselves erudite and learned. These fools, like the blind led by the blind, go round and round."

(Vide page 147, section 38)

This feature of the Dikshitar in trying to deny their great past heritage of Saivism has made a section of the Saivas question the Dikshitar's claims to be called Tillai vazh Andanar as we find the priests of Nataraja addressed in the first line of the Tiru-Tondattohai poem. In the face of danger they had always run away from Tillai abandoning Nataraja. *Periya puranam* tells us that they fled from Tillai fearing the wrath of Kutruva nayanar when they refused to crown him, leaving just one caretaker behind. It is a part of history that when Muslim forces under Tippu occupied the Chidambaram Temple and drove away the priests and the devotees, making the temple a temporary military fort, the ancient Tillai vazh andanar had also run away. A long time after, on the proclamation of Queen Victoria that there would be no interference from the British in the religious matters of the Hindus, the temples like Tillai and most others, which were administered by the East India Company in their own way, were handed over to such of the local Hindus who were willing to take them over. The Saivas above said now say that the Tillai temple was taken over by some brahmins of the locality just as the Kamakshi temple of Kanchi was taken over by the Sankaracharya there, that the original Tillai vazh Andavar had run away, no one knowing what became of them, and that the present priests who call themselves Dikshitas are not Tillai vazh Andavar and that these deserve to be deposed, in as much as they try to call themselves Brahmins without the glorious name of Siva-brahmins or Sivacharyas.

It is time the Saiva community in a concerted action pulls them up teaching them their duty to the Siva cult and to its Tamil scriptures. Unless they rise to the occasion and understand the popular demand for recognition of the place of Tamil in the Nataraja worship, the future of the dikshitar is doomed and they would be liquidated very soon in the march of social and religious progress.

APPENDIX

The Saiva spiritual Preceptors (*Samaya acharyas*) are four in number - Sambandhar, Appar, Sudarar and Manikkavacakar. Of the four, Saint Manikkavacakar lived in the days of King Varaguna Pandiya II (862-911 A. D.) and so naturally Saint Sundarar who lived by 700 A. D. and whose song was the basis for Sekkilar's chronicle, could not sing of the later Acharya Manikkavacakar. Sekkilar mechanically followed the list and the order of the Saints as given by Saint Sundarar in his poem *Tirut - Tondat - Tohai* and did not make the least deviation from it. Hence though Manikkavackar was considered a great acharya even in Sekkilar's day, he did not mention him at all for the simple reason that Sundarar did not mention him. But any history of the Saiva Saints could not afford to omit Manikkavacakar. Hence, we are giving here the life and work of Saint Manikkavacakar also as the first story in this Appendix.

The story of Sendanar (middle of the 10th century A. C.) is in a class by itself. It is one of the most revealing stories of God's grace on the humblest in the land. Nambiyandar Nambi mentions him as the 'untouchable' and his life has a parallel in Vaishnavism in the lives of Tirup-Panalvar and Periyalvar.

Sekkilar, the Chief Minister of Emperor Kulottunga Chola II (1133-1150) wrote the chronicle of the Saints. It is but fitting that his life is also given here briefly.

So is the story of Saint Nambiyandar Nambi who was responsible for the discovery and publication of the Saiva hymns and who had also written a short poem on the 63 Saints which formed one of the source books for Sekkilar for his *Periya puranam*.

In the long line of later Saints in Saivism, we consider three saints most important - Pattinattar, Arunagirinathar and Tayumanavar. They continue the message of the Acharyas and their philosophy of love and surrender, and

they have also sung quite a substantial volume of devotional poems which are most popular even today. So, in order to complete the picture, we have included here an account of their lives also.

1. SAINT MANIKKAVACAKAR

Saint Manikkavacakar was the fourth of the Acharyas or spiritual preceptors of Saivism. He lived in the later half of the 9th century. His songs known as *Tiruvacakam*, the Holy utterances have been collected into the eighth book of the Saiva canon. Of the four different paths of spiritual observance, his life is considered to signify the fourth, namely, the path of spiritual wisdom, *Jnana*.

The life of Manikkavacakar is handed down to us in the form of legends and poems composed by various writers. They do not much vary in detail. He was born in Tiru-Vadavur near Madurai, in a brahmin family. He grew up as an young man well versed not only in all the secular arts but in all the sacred lore too. His fame as a master of sacred knowledge reached the Pandiya ruler at Madurai who appointed him as his Chief Minister. The title of Brahma-Raya (Prince of Spiritual Wisdom) was conferred on him by the king.

Historically, we should remember that this period was one in which the Pallava empire of Kanchipuram was collapsing and other princes under the Pallava supremacy were just trying to regain their territory and monarchy. By 846 A.D. Vijayalaya re-established his Chola dynasty which was to become in the next hundred years one of the greatest empires South India had seen. The Pandiya Prince at Madurai should also have been struggling for his suzerainty over Madurai. So the post of Chief Minister for our young man had with it considerable responsibility in consolidation and development.

We learn that the new Minister (whose natural name is not known and who is to be conferred the title Manikavacakar only later) acquitted himself very well in the new post. The king sent him with considerable funds to purchase a large contingent of war horses which had just then arrived from Arabia in a sea port town on the Pandiyan coast.

The young minister was on his way to the sea port with a large retinue. However, his mind was inwardly longing for spiritual enlightenment. According to the Saiva religion, enlightenment comes only through a *guru* or preceptor who is the embodiment of the Lord God Himself.

The young man was passing through Perunturai when he heard the chanting of the scriptures. Going in that direction, he saw a preceptor seated beneath a sacred *kurunda* tree, surrounded by disciples. The preceptor was really God Siva who had come down on earth to impart divine knowledge to the young minister. The inner self of the minister immediately recognised the guru and he surrendered himself unreservedly to Him. The king and the mission of securing horses no longer existed for him. According to the Saiva doctrine, the master confers all spiritual knowledge on the disciple by just a look, the *nayana diksha*. The guru gave him this. Along with spiritual knowledge which gave him the fruits of rich spiritual experience, he received the gift of poesy too. The spiritual ecstasy which he felt overflowed his heart and person and there flowed from his lips the most beautiful verses, of rare lyrical charm and exquisite beauty in praise of God. Pleased with the songs, the Lord conferred on him the title of *Manikkavacakar* 'he of gemlike utterances'. The minister became a mendicant thereafter, and distributed all the king's funds for the feeding of men of God and for renovating the Siva temple in that place.

His retinue naturally reported the matter to the king. A monarch, ambitious and intent on expansion and development, could not tolerate such truancy. He summoned Manikkavacakar to his presence. With the permission of the

Master, who gave him a gem as a present to be given to the king, and asked him to report that the horses would be at Madurai on a particular day, the Avani mulam day. Manikkavacakar returned to Madurai and gave the present to the king. The king was no doubt pleased temporarily with the rare present and the minister's assurance that the horses would arrive on the particular day. But no horses seemed to arrive and so he got into a fury. The minister was thrown into prison and punished. He prayed to the Lord to save him.

However, on the appointed day, the Lord assumed the form of a horse rider, converted, so the legends say, jackals into war horses, and along with a group of his retinue mounted on horses, brought a large number of steeds in martial array before the king. When they were paraded before him, the king was very much pleased and when the leader was presented to him, he was involuntarily impelled to bow before the leader, who was none other than God Himself. Manikkavacakar was released and honoured.

But this did not last long. The same night the horses resumed their jackal forms and ran away from the stables, biting and mauling the regular horses and causing great havoc and confusion. The king concluded that Manikkavacakar had played a big hoax upon him, and caused him to be more severely punished. The poor man again prayed to the Lord to save him from this pitiable condition.

A miracle was performed. The Lord caused vast floods to flow into the river Vaihai which was coursing across the City and there were many breaches on the river bunds and the city was under water. To save the city, the river bunds were apportioned to the citizens and they were ordered to repair their allotted portions. An extremely pious and religious old woman by name Vandī, who was selling rice cakes, was given a portion of the bund as her share of work. As she had no able bodied person to help her, she prayed to the Lord for help. The Lord entered her service as a labourer for repairing the bund. But the new labourer

appeared to be more intent upon eating the cakes, did not take his work seriously and did not do his portion of the work properly. When the king came on his round of inspection, he saw this and thrashed the idle labourer with a cane. The stroke of the cane, however, was felt not only by that labourer, but by all beings in the city including the king himself. The king realised that the labourer was no other than God. He now understood that all this was an act of God to show His intercession on behalf of Manikkavacakar. He realised the saint's greatness, fell at his feet and immediately released him from service under him.

Manikkavacakar then proceeded to Chidambaram, the place of the Cosmic Dance of Lord Nataraja. He visited many important shrines on his way, pouring out his soul in the most lyrical songs of the language. He came into contact with children and girls and poured forth his longing for the Master by singing new songs with the children's play motifs. Finally he came to Chidambaram and was staying there worshipping the Lord for some time.

A legend says that the Buddhist king of Sri Lanka with his dumb daughter and a host of Buddhist priests came there for having a religious disputation with Manikkavacakar. The saint made the dumb daughter of the Buddhist king speak and answer their questions and thus he was able to assert his own faith and defeat the Buddhists in argument. They declared themselves defeated and left.

The end of Manikkavacakar was drawing near. Lord Nataraja appeared before him one day in the form of an old brahmin from Madurai and requested him to repeat to him all the verses he had so far sung in praise of God so that he might write them down and chant them. This the saint did. The old man wrote them down on palm-leave. This is the book now known as the *Tiruvacakam*. The old man also added a colophon: "Written by the Lord of handsome Tiru Chitrambalam to the dictation of Vadavuran" (Vadavuran is Manikkavacakar born at Tiru Vadavu).

Tiruchitrambalam means Chidambaram). The next morning the poems were discovered by the temple priests on the steps in front of Lord Nataraja in the sanctum of the shrine. From a reading of the colophon at the end of the book every one realised that the author was Manikkavacakar and that Lord Nataraja Himself had written down these songs to his dictation. They went to Manikkavacakar and with due honours and in all humility requested him to teach them the meaning of the songs. The saint only now realised that his old visitor of the previous day was Lord Nataraja Himself. Very humbly he took them all back to the presence of Lord Nataraja in the temple, and, pointing out "He is the purport of all my songs", went into the sanctum and disappeared. The individual self had merged with the Cosmic Self. Such is the glorious consummation of the life of the Saint.

Legends say that this saint lived for thirty two years and his day is celebrated on a day in June-July every year in most temples. His *Tiruvacakam*, the book of holy utterances is now the greatest book of hymns which the Tamil language possesses. An old proverb says that "He who does not melt at the words of *Tiruvacakam* can melt at no other."

Even as Sekkilar wrote the *Periya puranam*, a humble bhakta called Kadavul ma-munivar, 'the great sage God' (his natural name itself is not known), has written the biography of Manikkavacakar in 545 very fine verses charged with simple devotion, in the 15th century.

II

Unlike the lives of the other three Acharyas, the incidents in the life of Saint Manikkavacakar are not many. They are only two - those connected with his realization and those connected with his union with God. Siva came to him as a guru, enslaved him spiritually at Tirupperundurai and when he had to undergo great hardship at Madurai because of his breach of trust with the king in the matter of the purchase of horses, many miracles were worked there on his

account - conversion of jackals into horses, flooding the city with the Vaihāi waters, and then receiving a cane thrash from the king - all for the sake of the saint. These resulted in his release from the services of the king and in his freedom to tour Siva shrines and work out his own salvation.

Manikkavacakar did not ask for anything from God except for relief from the punishment of the king when he had spent the king's funds on religious work at Tirupperunturai. The only occasion of a miracle worked by him was when he caused the dumb daughter of the Sri Lanka king to answer the questions of the Sri Lanka Buddhists. Otherwise his whole life is a series of illumination, darkness and forgetting, then again realization and so on. The culminating incident was the union of the saint at the feet of Lord Nararaja pointing out that that was the meaning of all his writing.

III

Manikkavacakar has sung 51 poems in his Tiruvacakam, totalling 656 verses in 3394 lines. Some of the poems have a definite pattern in their construction and form which indicates that the form belongs to a later period. He had travelled from Uttarakosamangai and Madurai in the south upto Chidambaram in the Chola country. Probably he visited such places as Tiru Annamalai and Tiruk-Kaluk-kunram in the north. All through his tours he had observed children at play along the streets. He seems to have been attracted by the popular tunes and motifs of the songs accompanying the games and he has utilized these in the composition of most of his songs. About 15 of his poems are composed on these folk song motifs. In this respect, he has made an innovation in the composition of devotional songs.

Important among these are two songs, *Tirup-Pallieluchi*, song sung in order to awaken the Lord at dawn from His sleep and *Tiru Empavai*, song of girl children waking up one another for a morning bath symbolizing immersion

in His Grace. Both the songs have a ritualistic and social value among the Saiva people, being sung during the month of Marhali (December-Janauary) at the early morning hour by the entire community. In one of the songs he has mentioned that the purpose of all *palli-eluchi* songs in general is to know the Lord's will in doing one's own allotted duty.

Though this saint is considered to symbolize through his living and his songs, the path of *jnana* or realization of God through wisdom born of His own grace, his songs constitute a spiritual biography of himself - stages of self surrender, enslavement, illumination, then a forgetting, a period of spiritual darkness, despair, pangs of separation, again a glimpse of illumination and so on till the very end. The mature mind can itself go through all these processes and feel that the entire singing is of its own struggles and to that extent the entire *Tiruvacakam* constitutes the spiritual journey of each aspirant along the pathway to God. Thus this book is intimately woven into the life and aspirations of each individual and becomes a personal record. It is not Manikkavacakar that is crying for the Lord's presence and enlightenment, but the individual himself. That is the relevance of *Tiruvacakam* to every individual today. He may sing the Devaram, detaching himself from the thoughts and utter them objectively but the *Tiruvacakam* is one of personal involvement where he goes through all the processes mentioned therein and subjects himself to all the pangs for which Manikkavacakar had been subject to. Not only songs but joys too. The feeling of joy and elation is real and is fully experienced by the reciter of the song. Such is the magic quality of *Tiruvacakam*.

The Saiva community had realised the special nature of Manikkavacakar's songs as distinct from the Devaram songs. They had understood that Devaram is a song of praise, of worship, while *Tiruvacakam* is a cry of a soul in agony, crying out for enlightenment.

2. SAINT SENDANAR

*“The humble porridge which Sendan offered in the rag
was like nectar to the Lord” - Nambiyandar Nambi.*

God recognizes sincere love and dedication, however meek and humble, and is never slow to make it known among the great and the elite of the land. The meek devotee may not have the pomp and splendour accompanying regal worship, but his worship is nonetheless dear and pleasing to the Lord. The story of Sendan well illustrates this.

Sendan was born in a village near Chidambaram in one of the lowest classes of society. By reason of his low birth, he could not go into the temple and join the flock of temple worshippers but could worship only from outside the four outer walls. This external bar was really no bar for Sendan, who was always having a vision of the Dance of Nataraja inside his heart. This vision lifted him into a state of the highest bliss. The inner worship of Sendan was so profound and soulful, and yet so simple and trusting, that Lord Nataraja was deeply moved by it. He Himself planned to make it known to the general worshipping public.

Sendan was a wood cutter by profession. He used to go into the woods nearby, gather some wood and sell it in the city of Chidambaram. The income he earned in this manner was meagre and was not sufficient to enable him to purchase rice for a full meal. So he used to purchase other cereals which were cheaper, and naturally inferior in quality. These he made into a porridge, offered it to Lord Nataraja in his home, and then shared it with any poor mendicant who happened to pass by. Giving of food to the needy is a sacred duty enjoined by custom and religion, and Sendan never faltered from this duty even under the most difficult conditions.

The grand annual temple festival of Lord Nataraja was going on. On the last day, a mendicant appeared at his doors for food. It was a rainy day. The wood gathered by Sendan

that day was not much, and so he could not get any high price for his wood. The cereals purchased by him could afford only a poor fare for himself and yet poorer for any guest. Still he cheerfully took the mendicant inside and gave him the porridge he had prepared. The visitor seemed to enjoy the fare offered.

"I relish very much the rare dish given by you now. As it is a rainy day, I may not get any food for my next meal anywhere. I shall therefore take with me whatever is left with you!" So saying, he packed in his rag the food left over and went his way. Sendan had almost nothing to eat but he felt glad that his guest had enjoyed the humble food he had offered. Little did he know that the visitor was none other than Lord Nataraja Himself, bent upon securing public recognition to the humble worship of Sendan !

Lord Nataraja caused some crumbs of the porridge to lie strewn about round his image in the sanctum of the temple.

The Chola King of the land was also a very pious worshipper of Nataraja. Every day he performed a special worship to Nataraja in his palace. At the end of his puja, Lord Nataraja used to cause the sound of the anklet bells on His dancing feet to be heard by the king. Hearing the bells, the king was able to understand that his worship had been accepted by Him. However, on this day, he did not hear the bells, and so was naturally sad. He did not take any food for the day. "I fear I have offended Lord Nataraja in some manner and hence He has not approved of my worship. How have I offended Him ? What amends shall I make now ?" pondered the king. He was deeply perturbed.

But Nataraja appeared in his dream and said : "My friend, you had committed no offence. But We had been away to the hut of Sendan to partake of the dear and sweet porridge which he had offered. Hence We were unable to accept your worship and sound the anklet bells as usual."

The king was amazed. "Who is this Sendan ? I must see him and pay him my respects" he mused. When the temple priests went to open the temple in the early morning,

they found crumbs of porridge strewn all around Nataraja in the sanctum. This was a desecration which had never before happened ! thought they. So they reported it immediately to the king. He knew, from his dream, that this was all the work of Nataraja to make the devotion of Sendan known to the world. Immediately he went to the temple for worship and saw the crumbs of the porridge which He had partaken at Sendan's hut and which He had brought back to the temple in His rag. The king's messengers, sent out to search for Sendan throughout the city, were unable to locate him. The king was anxious to find Sendan and to honour him.

Lord Nataraja devised a means for this too. That morning, the car festival of the temple was in progress. Lord Nataraja was brought out from the inner sanctum to the thousand pillared hall, elaborate-puja was offered to Him, and then He was taken out and placed on a specially decorated pedestal on the chariot. The auspicious moment arrived and people in their thousands began to tug at the two ropes. But the chariot would not budge ! The king's forces and even his army of elephants tried, but failed to move the chariot from its place of rest.

Just then, a voice from the heavens rang forth, high above the din and noise of those tugging at the ropes : "Senda, sing a *Pallandu*." (A *pallandu* is a benedictory poem blessing the person concerned with long life and lasting glory.) People were astounded to hear the voice but could not of course know the person it indicated. When Sendan heard the Voice, tears of joy flowed from his eyes and he cried, "O Lord ! Is it Thy will to cause this poor humble servant of Thine to sing Thy glory ?" The Muse of Poetry settled on his lips and the unlettered low caste Sendan became a gifted singer of hymns ! He began to sing a new verse composed at the moment. Words of delicious music, set to the *panchamam* tune, flowed from his lips, without any apparent effort from him:

..May Tillai rule for ever !

May His devotees grow in numbers !

*Let the ungodly disperse.
 Long life and glory to the Lord,
 The Consort of Uma of swanlike gait,
 Who, seated in the Golden Hall,
 Causing illumination on all the earth,
 Bestowed His grace on us and guided us
 Along the path of snapping all births."*

He sang a poem of thirteen verses in the same strain and when he ended, the chariot which had so long refused to move, now gently and majestically moved at a gentle pull from Sendan and the others.

As he was singing, naturally the king also saw him and realized at once that this was Sendan whom God had mentioned to him in his dream. He rushed to him with folded arms and bowed at his feet and told him the dream he had of the Lord's partaking of his porridge, and honoured him in a fitting manner. The poor harijan wood cutter had now been raised higher than the highest.

Sendan felt still more humble to learn of the inscrutable ways of God's Grace. His low birth was no longer an impediment to his recognition as a man of God.

The humble porridge offered by him to Lord Nataraja came thereafter to be a symbol of devotion, an offering most dear to Him and on the *Ardra* day in the month of *Margali* (December - January), Nataraja is worshipped with this special offering in all the South Indian temples and in all the homes, on this day of Dance. This day continues to be the day of the *Ardra darsana*, the day of the Cosmic Dance of Lord Nataraja. The *pallandu* poem sung by him has come to be sung daily during the hour of the evening puja by the temple musicians in all the Siva temples even today. In three other temples where Sendan worshipped, he sang three more moving songs. They belong to the group known as *Tiru - Isaippa* (musical songs) the Nineth Book in the Saiva canon.

The Chola prince who honoured Sendan is identified with King Gandar-Aditta, who was the Chola emperor between 950-957 A. D. Siam beyond the seas (modern Thailand) was a vassal state of the Cholas then. The Siam ruler devoutly worshipped Nataraja at Chdambaram and caused the *pallandu* song to be sung as a song of divine benediction in his court. We learn it is being sung even today as a song of benediction at the time of the ruler's coronation : the name *pallandu* is found abbreviated into *llandu*.

Sendan is the counterpart in his songs and in his life of Perialvar and Tiruppanalvar the harijan saint, both from Vaishnavism.

3 SAINT NAMBIYANDAR NAMBI

The *Devaram* or the first seven Books of the Saiva Hymns were sung by the three Acharya Saints - Tiru Jnana Sambandhar, Tiru Navukkarasar and Sundaramurti. These Hymns were not collectively available to the devotees for about three centuries after their composition and the person responsible for unearthing them and making them available was Saint Nambiyandar Nambi in the days of the Chola Emperor Rajaraja I (985-1014 A. D.). It is but fitting that we know the life and work of this young saint.

He was the young son of the temple *archaka* of Tiru Naraiyur Siva temple near Chidambaram. Once in his father's absence, when he prayed to the image of Polla - Pillaiyar (the Unhewn form of Vinayaka) in the temple, to eat the food offering made by him. Vinayaka actually ate up the food. This attracted universal attention.

Rajaraja Chola, a great Siva bhakta himself, ruling from Tanjavur over the Chola country, was anxious to get at the *collected* songs of the *devaram*. He sought the help of this child bhakta of Vinayaka. Vinayaka told Nambi that the songs.

were kept in a closed room by the side of the *chit-sabha*, Dance Hall of Nataraja at Chidambaram. The temple priests told the King that the room would open only when the three Devaram singers came there. The King thereupon conducted a festival for the three and brought their images to the room. The room opened.

When the palm leaves were taken out, most of them had been eaten away by termites but a voice from the heavens told the assembled people that enough songs were retained for the benefit of the Saiva people. Nambi took out the songs and sorted them out into seven books, the first three books, by Saint Sambandhar, the next three by Saint Tirunavukkarasar and the seventh book by Saint Sundarar.

The music for the songs had been forgotten. By divine guidance, a young *Pana* girl coming in the line of Saint Tiru Nila-Kanthap-panar of Erukkattam-puliyur, the yazh accompanist of Sambandhar, was brought there and she set the proper classical unes (*pann*) for the songs. The songs are sung this day in the tunes set by that *pana* girl.

Then Nambi at the request of the King, collected other devotional songs upto his day in four more books-*Tiruvacakam* by Manikkavacakar as the Eighth Book, other miscellaneous *musical* songs as the Nineth Book, Tirumular's *Tiru Mantram* as the Tenth Book, and all other *non-musical* devotional songs upto his day as the Eleventh Book. He added his own ten songs into the last Book, the Eleventh.

Such is the contribution of Nambi towards the collection and codification of the Saiva devotional songs. An equally valuable feature is his song of 89 verses by him known as *Tirut-Tondar-Antadi* wherein he has mentioned succinctly the names of the 63 saints and the 9 group saints of Saint Sundarar's *Tirutondat'ohai*, in the same order. What is important in the verses is that Nambi has mentioned here each saint, his place, region, his community and the distinct service which he performed for Siva or for Siva

bhaktas. This has been a source book to *Sekkilar* in writing his biography of the Saints, the *Periya puranam*. Hence the relevance of the life of Nambi in this account of the Saints.

Sundarar has spoken only of 60 Saints. But Nambi has added Sandarar's parents and Sundarar himself to the list making it 63 and so Sekkilar has followed this number 63.

SAINT SEKKILAR

Sekkilar was the Chief Minister under the Chola Emperor Kulottunga II (1133-1150). He was born at Kunrattur a small village in modern Chingleput district. He was named Arul-mozhi-Devar. His attainments in learning and his general character attracted the attention of the Chola monarch who invited him to be his Chief Minister in his capital city, in the name of Uttama Chola Pallavarayar.

As the king's minister, Sekkilar found that his king was much enamoured of the Jain epic *Jivaka Chintamani* which was unusually erotic in content. He thought that a king coming of the Chola dynasty which always professed the Saiva religion and which had been administering a thousand Siva temples in the land should not waste his time in reading Jain books and told him so. When the king asked Sekkilar if there were any Saiva stories of good poetic merit, Sekkilar mentioned the list of saints enumerated by Saint Sundarar in his *Tiru-Tondit-Tohai*, and elaborated by Nambiandar Nambi into a large *antadi* in the days of Rajaraja Chola. The king thereupon commissioned him to write it in the form of an epic in elaborate detail.

With necessary funds, Sekkilar then went to Tillai (Chidambaram) for writing the epic book. He prayed to Lord Nataraja there for guidance in his work and Nataraja asked him to begin his work with the word '*Ulahelam*' (all the worlds). Accordingly Sekkilar began to compose the epic staying in the thousand pillared hall of the

temple. He followed the order of the list mentioned by Sundarar and divided his poem into 11 *sargas* corresponding to the 11 verses in Sundarar's *Tiruttondat-tohai* with a prefatory section and a concluding section, making a total of 13 sections.

The opening section deals with the usual preface, description of Kailas, the Chola country and its ancient capital city, Tiru Arur. In dealing with the city, he has introduced the story of Manuniti Chola which is mentioned even in *Silappadhikaram*. In an additional chapter here he introduces the story of Saint Sundarar, the wedding arranged for him, its stopping by the Lord Siva, then his wedding with Paravai at Tiru Arur and his singing the *Tiruttondattohai* there. The next 11 sections contain the chronicles of the Saiva Saints mentioned in the corresponding verse of Sundarar's poem. The last section deals with Sundarar's ascent to Kailas. Thus the great epic of 4253 verses begins with the birth and wedding of Sundarar and ends with his ascent to the heavens, which marks his end on earth.

Sekkilar was a great patriot and a loyal minister of the Chola. The opening chapters on the Chola country and the city of Tiru Arur bear ample evidence to this trait. Besides he makes very laudatory references to the Chola wherever possible in the text. At the same time, he is equally loyal to the Tondainadu, the country of his own birth, which he glorifies in the chronicle of Tiruk-Kurippu Tondar of Kanchi.

The king was making frequent enquiries about the progress of the great poem. When the work was completed, he attended its exposition fully and honoured the author. He placed the book and the author Sekkilar on his royal elephant and took out a procession, himself whisking the *chamaras* on the elephant-back with both hands. Then he released him from his duties as Minister and left him free to worship Lord Nataraja. As Minister, Sekkilar, had great devotion and allegiance to Siva enshrined at Tiru Nagesvaran near Kumbhakonam and on retirement he constructed a similar Nagesvara temple at his own place Kunrattur for his worship.

His book, *Tiruttondar puranam* the lives of the Men of God, also called *Periya* (the great) *puranam* (because men of God are considered even greater than God Himself) is a unique composition of its kind unequalled as a testament of devotion among all the languages of the world (if we may say so). During the king's reign, the book has been grouped as the 12th Book of the Saiva Canon.

The story of Sekkilar and of the writing of the *Periya puranam* - the lives of the Saints - have been written in a fine poem of 103 verses by about 1300 A. D. by Saint Umapati, the fourth religious preceptor of Saivism in the line of Saint Meykandar. Here he gives a detailed analysis of the 63 saints and their service. For example he has pointed out that all classes in society are represented in the *Puranam* - brahmins, siva brahmins, mamattirar, crowned monarchs, petty chiefs, merchants, farmers, cowherds, weaver, potter, oilman, fisherman, toddy tapper, washerman, soldier and the untouchables. Then he says that some attained bliss by the grace of the guru, some by the worship of the Siva linga, and some by their worship of the emblems of Siva. The poets, musicians and those that were both poets and musicians are classified. There is another list of householders, ascetics and brahmacharis. The bhaktas do not belong to one region or one quarter, not one city or one clan, or one name or one period. In every category which Umapati has mentioned, he mentions the number of saints and their names. He has summed up the number of verses as 4253 but the present text has 4286 verses, the extra verses being later interpolations. This *Puranam* is our only source for our knowledge of the life of Sekkilar,

*“It is easy to swim the blue seas;
To count the fine sand on the shore;
To separate the waves on the high seas as one two etc;
To count the fish in the seas;
To count the stars an the firmament;
But not even the celestials can evaluate
The stories of the servants of God
Who bean His feet on their heads;
Only Sekkilar can,”*

— Saint nmapati.

SAINT PATTINATTAR¹

Perhaps the most popular singer on spiritual matters in all Tamilnad is Saint Pattinattar. Beggars and wandering minstrels sing his songs to the accompaniment of a single stringed harp while asking for alms from house to house, throughout the length and breadth of the land. Pious devotees and learned scholars alike study his poems. Many of his songs are household words.

Pattinattar came of a princely merchant family in the coastal city of Kaverip-pattinam in Tanjavur district. The name Pattinattar simply means 'the citizen of the coastal city.' This was the capital of the early Chola dynasty in the centuries just before and after Christ. It had a very large and brisk overseas trade. Our saint did not live in that period but lived at a much later period. In his early years he was a prince among such traders, with a large fleet of merchant vessels.

He was well advanced in age and yet he had no child. People in India believed that every householder should beget sons to continue his line. Naturally, Pattinattar was anxious to get a son and had been praying to the Lord. By His Grace, a brahmin couple of the place found a divine child close to a temple tank and, again by divine direction, they brought the child to Pattinattar and gave it to him in exchange for gold. The merchant was happy to receive the boy and he brought him up in a regal manner, as his own child.

¹ In the history of the Saiva saints there have been two great saints at different periods both known by the same name Pattinattar. The earlier saint lived probably in the tenth century A. C. and had sung five classical songs of fine literary beauty which have been grouped into the Eleventh Book of the Saiva canon. The second saint lived in the fourteenth century and had sung mostly stray verses which are immensely popular even among the unlettered people. The story given here is the story of this later day saint.

The boy grew up well versed in all arts and business matters too and in course of time went out to sea with considerable merchandise at an auspicious moment. After the lapse of some months, he returned from the sea and brought back to his adopted father hordes of wealth. Pattinattar was naturally much pleased, but his joy could not last long. One fine morning the young merchant was missing and could not be found anywhere. Great was the grief of Pattinattar and his wife. Just then a playmate of the missing son came to them and gave them a scroll sent by the son, with the words that this was the greatest gift he would give his father. A needle with its eyelet broken was attached to the scroll which read : "Not even an eyeless needle will go with you on your last journey." (An eyeless needle signifies a thing of no use.)

This was the turning point in the merchant prince's life. It was enough to spark off the divine glow latent in the heart of Pattinattar. He ordered his minister to give away all his property to the poor and immediately renounced everything, wife and kin, riches and possessions, on the spot and, with just a loin cloth to cover his body, left his home never to return.

His wife did not approve of the distribution of his riches to the poor and the needy. So she complained to the local ruler that this minister was squandering the property of Pattinattar. Bhadrakiri, the ruler, was a very wise man. He was anxious to meet Pattinattar face to face and probe into the secret of his renunciation. So he sought out Pattinattar, who was perched on a heap of ashes on the cremation ground. Stopping his retinue at a distance, Bhadrakiri approached Pattinattar barefooted and asked him in a semi-ironical vein, what good he found in his present state.

"Don't you see", replied Pattinattar with a smile, "We (clad in a beggarly loin cloth) sit, while you (a prince in royal robes) stand before us. This is self-evident!"

This was again a turning point in the life of the ruler, who returned not very much downcast but thoughtful. He knew that Pattinattar's state was very high and unattainable. Bhadragiri's renunciation is another moving story.

There are scores of interesting stories connected with Pattinattar and his wanderings. He had formerly promised his mother that he would go over to her on her death and cremate her body. This he did now. Then he wandered through several places and came to Tiru-Venkadu, near his own city. Learning that his former minister Sendan, who had given away all his riches to the poor and the needy, was still kept imprisoned, Pattinattar sang a song praying to the Lord to cause his minister to be freed from his fetters and brought before him. A miracle happened and Sendan stood before him, a free man.

Then again, Pattinattar continued his wanderings and reached in course of time Tiru Otriyur, on the outskirts of modern Madras. He stayed here for a long time, playing with little children tending cattle near the sea shore. He was a very genial playmate for them and they enjoyed his company. One day he knew his end was near. He asked the boys to cover him up with a large earthen urn on the sea sands. They did so. When they came and took it out the next morning, he was no more; he had entered into his eternal Samadhi (blissful union with God).

Such in brief is the story of this 'great soul, a *raja-rishi*, a princely sage, who contended that this state can accrue through full renunciation if the mind is kept unattached to worldly possessions.

II

This Pattinattar lived in the 14th century and has sung a large number of stray verses. We shall be content here with having just a peep into his mind, through one or two verses. "It matters little if those that have no love in the heart lead the life of a recluse, wandering through jungles,

living only on air, and go about with a begging bowl. But even if those that have set their hearts truly on the Lord at Tiru Idaimarudar enjoy worldly pleasures with women, they are certain to realise final bliss." Giving to the needy and feeding the poor is the one single piece of social service which came nearest to service to God. "These fools had not come into this world with any riches nor do they take anything with them when they depart for good. All the riches they enjoy between the two states are merely gifted to them by God. What shall I say of these men who do not realise this and die without distributing anything to the needy?"

Again : "Even crowned monarchs, not to speak of the ordinary people, are reduced to a handful of ashes at the end. Men see this, yet hanker after worldly pleasures and never take refuge at the feet of the Lord dancing in the Golden Hall of Chidambaram". The company of the godly souls is what most pious people crave for. We are reminded of the story of Abu Ben Adhem, when Pattinattar asks the Lord to include his name in the long list of His devotees. In another place, he says ; "My Lord, let me enjoy the happiness of the celestial being : or let me suffer the most painful punishment in the worst purgatory. Let the world praise me as a good man or condemn me as bad. Let me be immersed in material plenty and happiness or suffer the direst penury. Let me live long, and keep young or let me die the next minute. I do not desire the one or shun the other, because I have now the rare privilege of going to your Sacred Feet and witnessing Your Dance, by joining the company of Your devotees."

Pattinattar is still considered by many to be an iconoclast because he asked ; "Does the Lord reside in stone and copper ?" They stretch this to say that his view was that God does *not* reside in stone and copper and idols are not to be worshipped. They forget the full verse and its significance. "God dwells in word, beyond words, in the scriptures, in the dark, in the high heavens, in the homes of the true seekers and among his devotees. Does he dwell in stone and copper (alone) ?" Surely these are not the words of an idol breaker.

Pattinattar prays for forgiveness from God on many counts : "I have not learnt Your scriptures. I have not contemplated on You. My heart is not moved at the thought of You. I do not think of You. I do not utter the Five Syllables. I do not worship at Your Feet. Please forgive me all these faults, my Lord of Kanchi." "The faults accruing from speech ; from evil thoughts ; from casting the eyes on things that should not be seen ; from listening to books which are not the true scriptures - forgive me these and similar faults, my Lord of Kanchi."

Pattinattar is moved by the great sacrifices made by saints in the past out of a surrender to God and cries out how he could reach God without such sacrifices : "I could not carve up my child to feed God (like Siruttondar). I could not give up worldly pleasures at the challenge of a lady (like Tiru Nilakanthar). I could not pluck out my eyes for God in a matter of six days (like Kannappar). How can I become Your slave, my Lord of Kalatti ?"

This despondency in him is only a passing phase. He always enunciates a positive philosophy to suffering mankind : "We have a piece of old cloth to put on, to stretch over the head to ward off heat, to wind round the body against chill winds. Everywhere there are open pials for laying our body down for sleep at night. If we are hungry, there is Lord Siva to feed us. We have therefore no wants."

In two remarkable verses, Pattinattar gives the greatest *upadesa* (salutary advice) to his own heart : "Oh my heart heed this. Place your faith in the guru, consider the body as just a puppet show, and your kith and kin as the crows in the market place, and this life as the water flowing from an overturned pot. This is my advice to you". "O my heart, remember, God exists : He is One. Riches are transient. Feed the hungry. A righteous life and good company are the best. Remember we reap according to our own destiny. This is my advice to you."

Many centuries ago, Pattinattar brought religions, ceremonials, worship and philosophy to the level of the unlettered man in the street and that is his greatest contribution to religion and to mankind. Says he : "Our place is Tiru-Alangadu, the shrine of the Cosmic Dancer Nataraja. We have with us the begging bowl, given by Him ; it is inexhaustible. There are the benevolent people to give us all that we ask. There is no equal for us here".

SAINT ARUNAGIRI NATHAR

The greatest saintly singer in Tamilnad literary as well as religious history after the canon singers is Aruunagiri-nathar (c. 1350-1425). His songs are the most popular among all levels of people - the classes and the masses. The unlettered masses are moved to ecstasy by the songs. He needs no introduction to any group of Tamil people of any creed in India and abroad. Such popularity has given rise to a number of ugly legends regarding him. Some have gone so far as to say that he was a brahmin from Andhra or even from Bengal. Shorn of all the false stories, his life is here briefly told.

He was born of pious parents in a velalar community and lived a happy domestic life. However, as fate would have it, he fell into evil ways and spent his early life with public women and spent all his fortunes on them. Ultimately disgusted with this kind of life, he wanted to end it and so jumped down from the tower of Tiru Annamalai temple, in an attempt at suicide. Lord Muruha whose ardent devotee he was, in His infinite mercy, saw to it that he came to no harm. He sustained him in his fall, gave him the sacred ash, gave him also the gift of poesy, and bade him sing His praises in sweet song.

Arunagiri is said to have sung 36,000 *Tirup-puhal* songs on Muruha, visiting all the shrines in Tamilnadu and worshipping Muruha in each shrine. Muruha enshrined

at Vayalur is considered to have given him spiritual enlightenment. Muruha gave a vision of Himself to the devotee who then sang the two poems, *Vel viruttam* and *Mayil viruttam*. (song on His spear and song on His peacock mount). Then he returned to Tiru Annamalai and though invited by the ruler Prabhuda deva raya, he declined but stayed on the gopura of that temple. While he was staying on in this manner, he felt angry with the famous poet Villiputhurar the renowned author of *Bharatam* for mercilessly cutting off the ears of inferior poets who were defeated by him in poetic competition. He then himself entered into a competition with Villi by asking him to give the meaning of the verses of a poem called *Kandar antadi* which he sang for the occasion. Villi went on explaining each verse but could not proceed when he came to the 54th verse which was a very difficult one, composed only of the alphabet TA in combination with all the vowels. Arunagiri the victor did not cut off Villi's ears but generously pardoned him and bade him behave more kindly towards lesser poets.

Though this is a popular legend, it may not have much veraeity. There was one Sambandhandan a poet and worshipper of Devi in the court of Prabhuda devaraya, who was very jealous of Arunagiri and his devotion to Muruha. Once he induced the Raya to request Arunagiri to give him a vision of Muruha in his court. Andan was a votary of Devi and when he proceeded to pray to Devi to be present in the court for a vision for Raya. Arunagiri sensed this and prayed to Muruha to be present in the lap of Devi as a child so that She might not leave Him and come over to the court. Having thus foiled Andan's effort, he caused Muruha through a song describing the Dance of Muruha to give a vision to the Raya. Muruha did so and in the great Effulgence of the Lord, the power of sight of all the unbelievers in the court was affected.

Then again, Andan out of his own jealousy, made Raya request Arunagiri to bring him the celestial flower, *Karpaka* blossom from the celestial region. Arunagiri left his body here and in the form of a parrot went and actually brought

the flowers but meanwhile Andan had the body of Arunagiri destroyed. Thereafter Arunagiri stayed on in the parrot's form in the hand of Lord Muruha and sang his famous *Kandar Anubhuti* on his own mystic experiences and finally his soul came to rest at the Feet of Muruha.

Though some of these legends are beyond human comprehension, the fact remains that Arunagiri has left behind about 1360 *Tiruppuhazh* songs, 25 *Tiruvahuppu* songs, *Vel viruttam* and *Mayil Viruttam* mentioned earlier, *Kandar Alankaram*, *Kandar Antadi* and *Kandar Anubhuti*. Arunagiri has extolled only Muruha and no one else, yet his songs are some of the greatest devotional legacy for all time for the Tamil people.

II

Arunagirinathar is always remembered for his *Tiruppuhazh* songs where in each of the 1360 songs here he has employed a different metre and different lilting sound scheme. All the *talas* that are mentioned in the later day Sanskrit musical treatises have nowhere any *sahitya* for them in any literature either in Sanskrit or in Tamil except in his writing. For nearly five centuries after him, the Tamils have been dancing as waves upon waves to the singing of *Tiruppuhazh* songs in temple festival functions. To him Sanskrit is equally a handmaid for poesy as much as Tamil and words from the two languages vie with one another in coming to his aid for poetic composition. The richness and variety of composition, the melody and sweetness, the sound and jingle in his verses are to be found nowhere else in the Tamil language or in any other language. The songs sway the Tamil people both through their word magic and through their thought content, to this day. When singing the songs, the atheist is as much at home as the theist and even creeds lose their significance and sing the Muruha songs and dance to their tune.

He highlights the six syllables of Muruha and after him, singing of *Tiruppuhazh* had become a must in musical concerts. Devotion and surrender, company of godly men,

overcoming the senses, giving to the hungry and the needy, conquering the ego, service to God and godly men, fearlessness, and ending the cycle of births and deaths are some of the great thoughts which he is never tired of preaching. His songs are a delight to the young, the children and the old alike, and the saying is that one who is thorough with the *Tiruppuhazh* is never afraid of anyone on earth. He has focussed attention on many obscure shrines in Tamilnad. Through his songs the spear and the peacock mount of Muruha have become important in his worship.

He holds Muruha to be the Supreme Being and his Muruha is not different from Lord Siva. The spear in His hand and His peacock mount come for equal praise in his songs. All puranic stories find mention in them. A large part of most of his songs is the praise of Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna. Muruha is the puranic nephew and son-in-law of Vishnu and hence the relevance.

His *Tiruvahuppu* and the two *viruttams* are composed, like *Tiruppuhazh*, in the same form of lilting metre and expound the same philosophy. His *Kandar Alunkaram*, not the lilting type, can compare with the *Devaram* and *Tiruvacakam* in instilling in young minds fearlessness and hope and the assurance of God's succour to the individual, however errant he might be. His *Kandar Anubhuti* is totally philosophic in character, where he expounds his joy in the experience of ineffable Divine Grace. Here we do not have any pangs of separation but only a surfeit of divine ecstasy. Even here he has placed a song on giving. This is apparently because of his involvement in social needs where people went about hungry owing to the Muhammedan invasions and the destruction of temples.

“Oh my wretched mind, Hearken unto me. Let me tell you the way for redemption. Give to the needy without holding back. Meditate upon the Lord's Feet. Scorch your accumulated *Karma* to ashes. Rid yourself of all action” -this is a famous verse from his *Kandar Anubhuti*.

His philosophy is certainly the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy where Siva is simply mentioned as Muruha. His words particularly in his *Alankaram* are always a source of refuge, joy and dauntless courage for children: "His flower-like feet are always as succour for the eye to mediate upon. His names like Muruha are always a succour for truthful words. For all ills committed previously, even in the past births, His twelve arms are the succour. For the lonely passage through life, His sharp spear and His peacock are the succour."

Arunagiri has chalked out a new path in poetic composition which had been attempted by many later day writers in stray verses, but no one has equalled or excelled him in form and content, in music and in capturing the imagination of the masses.

SAINT TAYUMANAVAR

Tayumanavar (1705-1742) a Chief Minister under the Nayaks, comes in the line of Saint Manikkavacakar and Saint Sekkilar who had been Chief Ministers under the Pandiya and the Chola rulers of their day. He was born at Vedaranyam in Tanjavur district and takes his name from Tayumanaswami, Lord Siva enshrined in the Tiruchirappalli temple. Early in life, he succeeded his father as chief minister of Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak of Madurai but his heart was all the time seeking a spiritual guru. He met Mownaguru at Tiruchirappalli, whose unspoken instruction to him was just "Be still".

Given the freedom to follow a spiritual path, he went to Ramesvaram in the extreme south and stayed there. He married and had a son. His wife died early. Then he had *sannyasa* under the same guru and a further *diksha*. He visited many shrines singing fine poetry at all the places and imparted divine knowledge to many disciples. He was ver-

handsome in form and because of certain happenings in the palace at Tiruchi, he relinquished his post of chief minister and ultimately he reached Ramanathapuram where he attained eternal *samadhi*.

II

Tayumanavar is remembered as a Saint of Saivism on account of the 1450 verses of both devotion and philosophy which he had sung. He would have sung more but only these are available. He was a well read man, with profound scholarship in all sectarian literature and in the Sanskrit and the Tamil languages. He was a great master in the use of Sanskrit which acts as a handmaid to his poetic composition. No doubt he uses a large volume of Sanskrit words in his songs but their use is not oppressive. There is force and vigour and a directness, simplicity and aptness which make us forget the language and melt in their meaning.

He considered all mankind as one, without any high or low and so his love and compassion extended to all. His aim in his songs had been to rid society of all discord and direct it towards the One God. In poetry he has made many innovations which are popular to this day. The couplet form, the *kanni*, has been utilised by him most effectively not only for high poetry but also for high philosophy. He has besides used the long drawn 14 feet *viruttam* in a large number of verses, to elaborate his theistic doctrines and in the last more than one hundred years these songs had been the most favourite for the *ragamalika* in musical concerts.

Tayumanavar hails in the tradition of the Saiva Nayanmar, the authors of the *Devarom* and the *Tiruvacakam*, although he lived about a thousand years after them. His is a mature and sober mind which sees God in everything around and hesitates even to pluck a flower for worship because it sees God in the flower. He unwaveringly preaches the modern one - world concept two hundred and fifty years ago and in this respect we find in him an echo of the Sangam philosophy, "all the world is my place and all are my kin." For him mankind is one and philosophies are one and God is one.

Although he is a profound scholar in language, literature, religion and philosophy, he has no use for scholarship and the higher philosophy in his scheme of the values of life, in his preparation therefor, and in the struggle to attain his goal of a universal vision and union with the All-pervasive One. His philosophy is the common man's direct approach through service and surrender and self-effacement and not the abstract philosophy of the wrangler and the pedant. He has no use for the body and the pleasures of the senses but he does not heap abuses on them as many others, like for example Pattinattar, had done. He always offers his mind, the ego as the sacrifice, at the altar of the temple the heart, his love as the bathing water ; his spirit is the food offering *naivedya*; his intellect the incense and lamp ; the deity in the sanctum is the God of Peace, Shanti.

Tayumanavar always seeks to effect an external harmony among all the various sects like the Advaita vedanta, the Saiva Siddhanta, the Siddha and even the Sakta, as well as an internal harmony of love to God and to all creation. He preaches also a philosophy of compassion ; he enjoins man to look on every being as God Himself and give it the love he would give to God. Tayumanavar preaches a higher philosophy, which soars higher than rituals and temple worship and he will have the greatest appeal for the thinking mind, be it unlettered or highly learned, for all time.

EPILOGUE

The purpose of this volume is to acquaint the English knowing reader with the lives and message of the Saiva saints as mentioned in the *Periya puranam*. As has been said in the text, Saint Sundarar had not exhausted the number of Saints who lived before him and Sekkilar did not concern himself with any others except those mentioned by Sundarar. There have been many saints earlier than Sundarar, earlier than Sekkilar and later than Sekkilar in the long history of religion for the last twenty centuries. In conformity with our purpose, we have restricted this writing only to the *Periya puranam* but have added the life and work of a few more saints, some earlier than Sekkilar and some later.

But it should not be construed that there have not been other saints in the later periods. There have been quite a large number of saints who had trod the different pathways to God, who had written devotional songs and philosophical treatises, and siddhar who had tried to mould the mass mind in their own way. Gandaradittar, the Chola King who had contributed a song in the Ninth Book of the Saiva canon is mentioned as a Sivajnani in later inscriptions. His queen Sembiyan Madevi, the greatest benefactress to temples has moulded the Chola dynasty as one devoted solely to Saivism. She could be counted a saint in her own right. Names such as Meykandar, Kachiyappa Sivachariyar, Sivavakkiyar, Guru Jnanasambandar and Kumaraguruparar will easily come to one's mind. During the centuries 12 to 20, their influence had been tremendous. But we had not attempted to swell either the number of saints or the pages of this book by narrating their lives.

II

The general message of the Saints has been all simple. They had attempted to lead people to God by their example, by their words which always induced people to worship God both in the heart and in the temple, and had taught them that feeding of the poor and service to men of God was most

pleasing to God. Worship of God was simple and required no pomp and it was open to every one. God could not be cheated by externals. He looked into the heart of man and showered His Grace accordingly. Devotion to God reaches out and embraces all creation in the form of devotion to godly men. All the saints mentioned here and all those not mentioned here conveyed only this message to the people.

A special feature in the narration of Sekkilar is that in all the cases of the Saints where they pass through a test and come out true in the service of God and godly men, Siva appears at the end to take the person concerned to Sivaloka or to confer eternal bliss on him. In most such cases, Siva appears with His consort Uma quite in conformity with the Saiva tradition. Uma is the aspect of Grace in Siva and the bestowal of Grace automatically means the presence of Uma

III

The discerning reader will have noticed that one feature had received special attention in most stories and that is the *giving of food*. The Saiva emblems such as the Sacred Ash, the Rudraksha, the Sivanama and the Mendicant's garb and his begging bowl are conspicuous in the stories, but it is the giving of food that was most important. The Siva bhakta never cared where his next meal came from and so society always took upon itself the care of the mendicants. Areas presumably were not thickly populated and foodgrains had not been grown on vast areas as is done in the present age. And so the great duty imposed on the householder in the matter of feeding. We find the saints going to any length of sacrifices in this feeding. Though the feeding is of the Sivabhaktas we have the dictum of Saint Tiru Mular in his *Tiru mantram* : "Give, give, Do not discriminate. Feed the poor. Do not amass property, Look at the crow, which calls its entire flock when there is any morsel available."

In the previous paragraph we spoke of giving of food to the needy. This was a social compulsion of the day. There was one other similar compulsion on Sekkilar himself in the writing of the biographies.

Even such an eminent historian and devoted saint-like Sekkilar could not help becoming a victim of the Arya-varna classification. The position in regard to Tamilnad was that there were numerous castes based on the work or profession in which the people were engaged. But this did not give one superiority over another in respect of social status. This was the position in the Sangam age. For example, we find the panar jostling as equals with princes, peasants and women in the higher levels of society. The panar were of the lowest caste in society, equivalent to what are called the harijans in the modern day. They were all singers and dancers, and the art gave them entry into royal society in a spirit of equality. They figure in literature as advisers to chiefs and rulers, as messengers of love and of peace and war. Their caste was no bar for their social relationship.

Sekkilar says Ilayankudi Marar was of the good sudra caste, and that Vayilar nayanar was of the ancient Sudra caste. These only illustrate the strong hold the varna concept had on him.

IV

One or two special features may be mentioned. Of the canonised saints, seven had been poets - Sambandhar, Appar, Sundarar, Tirumular, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Seraman perumal and Aiyadihal Kadavar kone. Their songs had been included in the canonical Books or Tirumurai. Of the Saints mentioned in the Appendix, the writings of Manikkavacakar, Sendanar and Nambiyandar nambi, besides Sekkilar himself, have been included in the Books. These have been mentioned in detail in the respective places. Of these singers two had been crowned monarchs (besides Gandaraditta Chola whose story does not find a place here), two had been chief ministers, one a woman and another from the lowest caste. Not only the Saints but even the much smaller group of poet among them had been truly democratic, representing various strata in society.

Quite a substantial number of these saints had been contemporary with one another. Contemporaries of Jnanasambandhar were St. Appar, Tiru Nilakantha yalppanar, Nilanakkar, Siruttondar, Kumkuliya - kalayar, Muruhar, Mangaiyarkkarasi, Nedumarar, Kulacchirai, Gananathar and naturally Appudi.

Sundarar and Seraman were friends and their contemporaries were Narasingamunaiyaraiyar, Eyar kone Kalikkamar, his father-in-law Manakkanjarar, Kotpuli, Viralmindar, Somayajimarar, and Perumilaik - Kurumbar. Sundarar mentions that Kalal-singer "is ruling over the world" in the present tense and so Kalal singar was his contemporary. Other saints contemporary with Kalal singar and so contemporary with Sundarar are Kalal-singer's father Kadavar Kone, Seruttunai, Pusalar and Sundarar's own parents Sadaiyar and Isaijnaniyar.

V

Some of the epithets employed by Saint Sundarar in referring to the Saints are not only interesting, but highly significant. We shall mention two. Kannappar was an illiterate hunter, one of the hill tribes. He had never attended any school but Sundarar calls him "Kannappar who was well versed in the fine arts". Surely this attribute cannot be given to him, we would say. But Sundarar instinctively feels that Kannappar has mastered all the arts in a previous birth and that mastery has followed him in the present birth as a hunter, and so the attribute "well versed in the arts" is fully justified.

The other Saint is Dandi, who was blind. Sundarar calls him "Dandi, with the sharp vision." In like manner, vision here is not the vision of the physical eye, in the present birth but a deeper perception through the inward vision. Events in the life of Dandi also justify the attribute.

A third instance is the case of Saint Meypporul. Sundarar calls him the saint who was great in the art of victory. The story is that on account of Meypporul's devotion to the sacred

ash, his mortal enemy, profusely smearing the ash on his body, killed him treacherously. But Meypporul stopped his aide from slaying the traitor and thus saved his life. This saving of the enemy's life is a great victory says Sundarar. Meypporul acted, as sung in the modern day by Bharati, 'Bestow your love on your enemy' (*Pahaiyanukku arulvay*) prompted by love for even the enemy and this was the greatest victory for him. We agree with Sundarar that 'the defeated is the victor.'

One of the most remarkable narrations is the story of Anayar. Anayar played the Panchakshara mantra on his flute. It was just this mantra and this music which took him to Siva loka. The description of his play on the flute and its effect on the world, both in the sentient and the non-sentient beings, is a piece to be read and enjoyed. This indicates the great mastery which Sekkilar had in the art of music. A parallel to Anayar's play may perhaps be had in the song of Periyalvar in the Vaishnava canon describing the play of Krishna on the flute in Gokula.

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GLOSSARY

Abhisheka	- bathing the image of a deity with water, oil or similar materials
acharya	- spiritual preceptor
adiyar	- servant, devotee of God
advaita	- non-duality
agama	- Saiva scripture like the Veda
ahimsa	- non-violence
alvar	- Vaishnava saint and canon singer
ammai	- mother
arival	- sickle
Bhairava	- a mendicant of the begging form of Siva
bhakta	- devotee
bhakti	- devotion to God
brahmachari	- religious student leading a life of celibacy
brahmin	- one of the highest rank in the four varna order
brahma randra	- the aperture on the crown of the head through which the liberated soul is considered to leave the body
brahmotsava	- annual temple festival of ten days
Chamara	- whisk, fly flapper
charya	- observance or religious discipline, the first of the four pathways to God in Saivism
Chola	- a dynasty of crowned kings of the Kaveri delta region
Dasa marga	- pathway to God through service as servant
devaram	- the first seven books of the Saiva Canon
Devi	- Sakti, consort of Siva
dharma	- righteousness, duty, virtue
diksha	- initiation by a spiritual teacher

Gayatri	- sacred mantra used in daily prayer and japa
gopura	- tall tower over the gateway to a temple
guru	- spiritual preceptor
Harijan	- one who was considered an untouchable
Jainism	- religion that follows Mahavira
jambu	- naval fruit and tree, (jambolanum)
japa	- repetition of a mantra in prayer
jnana	- divine knowledge
Kailas	- legendary abode of Siva, a peak on the Himalayas
Kalabhras	- an alien tribe of invaders from outside Tamilnadu who occupied Madurai and Puhar in the centuries 3 to 6 A.C.
kalakshepa	- religious discourse with music
karma	- action, theory of action giving an experience of the results thereof
kriya	- action, religious rites, ritualistic worship
Kural	- book of maxims said to be written by Tiruvalluvar 2000 years ago
Linga	- symbol of Siva in the sanctum of the temple which is a formless form
Mandapa	- hall
mantra	- mystic syllable, sacred formula
marga	- pathway to God
mukti	- liberation
Nagasvaran	- the chief organ of the temple orchestra music of Tamilnadu
naivedya	- food offering to God
natya	- dance
nayanar (pl. nayanmar)	- canonized devotee of Siva
nilakantham	- blue throat of Siva
niru	- sacred ash
Pallava	- dynasty of kings ruling from

	Kanchipuram between the 3rd and the 9th centuries A C.
pana	- a band of singers of the early periods, considered low in caste.
panchakshara	- five syllabled symbolic mantra of Siva, na-ma-si va-ya
Pandiya	- dynasty of kings ruling from Madurai
Panguni	- Tamil month March-April
pann	- a musical mode, raga
pranava	- the primordial sound OM
prakara	- corridors around the sanctum of the temple within its four walls
puja	- ritualistic worship
pulavar	- learned person
purana	- ancient legends
Raga	- musical tune
Rudraksha	- seeds of the eleocarpus used by the Saivas as their rosary or sacred beads
Rudramantra	- Vedic mantras in praise of Siva
Sahamarga	- pathway as comrade
sahitya	- musical composition
Saiva	- follower of Siva
Sakti	- consort of Siva, Energy of Siva personified as the Goddess Uma, the universal mother
samadhi	- intense contemplation on God resulting in union
samaya	- religion
sanmarga	- pathway as disciple
sannyasi	- mendicant, one who has renounced the world
satya	- truth
satyagrahi	- one who holds fast to truth
Sera	- dynasty of kings ruling over the west coast of Tamil nadu

siddhar	- class of mystic poets outside the orthodox fold
siddhi	- attainment of super human powers
sivacharya	- the siva-brahmin given the duty of performing Siva puja for the welfare of the community
Sivaloka	- region of Siva's presence
Taali	- a small trinket tied in a chain round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom and worn by her as long as he is alive
tapas	- much more than penance
tiru	- A prefix to names of persons, places etc. signifying holy and sacred
tirumangalya	- taali
tondar	- devotee or servant of God
Upadesa	- religious or spirital instruction
Vaishnava	- follower of Vishnu
vaisya	- merchant class
veda	- ancient Hindu scripture in the Sanskrit language
velalar	- farmer community
venba	- a type of verse in the Tamil language
vimana	- the raised structure over the sanctum in a temple
viruttam	- a type of verse in Tamil poetry
Yal	- an ancient Tamil musical instrument like the modern vina
yoga	- union, thought and mind control

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